

Euripides

HERAKLES



Translated by Tom Sleigh

With an Introduction and
Notes by Christian Wolff

THE GREEK TRAGEDY
IN NEW TRANSLATIONS

GENERAL EDITORS

Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro

EURIPIDES: Herakles

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CHRISTIAN WOLFF

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EDITORS' FOREWORD

"The Greek Tragedy in New Translations is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a *re-creation* of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times."

With these words, the late William Arrowsmith announced the purpose of this series, and we intend to honor that purpose. As was true of most of the volumes that began to appear in the 1970s—first under Arrowsmith's editorship, later in association with Herbert Golder—those for which we bear editorial responsibility are products of close collaboration between poets and scholars. We believe (as Arrowsmith did) that the skills of both are required for the difficult and delicate task of transplanting these magnificent specimens of another culture into the soil of our own place and time, to do justice both to their deep differences from our patterns of thought and expression and to their palpable closeness to our most intimate concerns. Above all, we are eager to offer contemporary readers dramatic poems that convey as vividly and directly as possible the splendor of language, the complexity of image and idea, and the intensity of emotion of the originals. This entails, among much else, the recognition that the tragedies were meant for performance—as scripts for actors—to be sung and danced as well as spoken. It demands writing of inventiveness, clarity, musicality, and dramatic power. By such standards we ask that these translations be judged.

This series is also distinguished by its recognition of the need of nonspecialist readers for a critical introduction informed by the best recent scholarship, but written clearly and without condescension.

Each play is followed by notes designed not only to elucidate obscure references but also to mediate the conventions of the Athenian stage as well as those features of the Greek text that might otherwise go unnoticed. The notes are supplemented by a glossary of mythical and geographical terms that should make it possible to read the play without turning elsewhere for basic information. Stage directions are sufficiently ample to aid readers in imagining the action as they read. Our fondest hope, of course, is that these versions will be staged not only in the minds of their readers but also in the theaters to which, after so many centuries, they still belong.

A NOTE ON THE SERIES FORMAT

A series such as this requires a consistent format. Different translators, with individual voices and approaches to the material in hand, cannot be expected to develop a single coherent style for each of the three tragedians, much less make clear to modern readers that, despite the differences among the tragedians themselves, the plays share many conventions and a generic, or period, style. But they can at least share a common format and provide similar forms of guidance to the reader.

1. *Spelling of Greek names*

Orthography is one area of difference among the translations that requires a brief explanation. Historically, it has been the common practice to use Latinized forms of Greek names when bringing them into English. Thus, for example, Oedipus (not Oidipous) and Clytemnestra (not Klutaimestra) are customary in English. Recently, however, many translators have moved toward more precise transliteration, which has the advantage of presenting the names as both Greek and new, instead of Roman and neoclassical importations into English. In the case of so familiar a name as Oedipus, however, transliteration risks the appearance of pedantry or affectation. And in any case, perfect consistency cannot be expected in such matters. Readers will feel the same discomfort with "Athenai" as the chief city of Greece as they would with "Platon" as the author of the *Republic*.

The earlier volumes in this series adopted as a rule a "mixed" orthography in accordance with the considerations outlined above. The most familiar names retain their Latinate forms, the rest are transliterated; *-os* rather than Latin *-us* is adopted for the termination of masculine names, and Greek diphthongs (such as Iphigeneia for Latin Iphigenia) are retained. Some of the later volumes continue this practice, but where translators have preferred to use a more consistent practice of transliteration or Latinization, we have honored their wishes.

2. *Stage directions*

The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays do not supply stage directions (though the ancient commentators often provide information relevant to staging, delivery, "blocking," etc.). Hence stage directions must be inferred from words and situations and our knowledge of Greek theatrical conventions. At best this is a ticklish and uncertain procedure. But it is surely preferable that good stage directions should be provided by the translator than that readers should be left to their own devices in visualizing action, gesture, and spectacle. Ancient tragedy was austere and "distanced" by means of masks, which means that the reader must not expect the detailed intimacy ("He shrugs and turns wearily away," "She speaks with deliberate slowness, as though to emphasize the point," etc.) that characterizes stage directions in modern naturalistic drama.

3. *Numbering of lines*

For the convenience of the reader who may wish to check the English against the Greek text or vice versa, the lines have been numbered according to both the Greek text and the translation. The lines of the English translation have been numbered in multiples of ten, and these numbers have been set in the right-hand margin. The notes that follow the text have been keyed to the line numbers of the translation. The (inclusive) Greek numeration will be found bracketed at the top of the page. Readers will doubtless note that in many plays the English lines outnumber the Greek, but they should not therefore conclude that the translator has been unduly prolix. In most cases the reason is simply that the translator has adopted the free-flowing norms of modern Anglo-American prosody, with its brief-breath- and emphasis-determined lines, and its habit of indicating cadence and caesuras by line length and setting rather than by conventional punctuation. Other translators have preferred to cast dialogue in more regular five-beat or six-beat lines, and in these cases Greek and English numerations will tend to converge.

Durham, N.C.
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2000

PETER BURIAN
ALAN SHAPIRO

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HERAKLES

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INTRODUCTION

Herakles is a figure rarely found in Athenian drama playing a tragic role. Darker aspects of his life appear briefly in Homer. In the *Iliad* Achilles evokes him as prototypical of a hero's tragic mortality (18.117–18). Odysseus, visiting the world of the dead, meets Herakles' ghostly double who is haunted by his former life of misery (*Odyssey* 11.601–26). More commonly Herakles is characterized by his fantastic exploits, by his geniality and by an immense capacity for endurance capped by final successes. This most famous and ubiquitous hero appears in the worlds of fairy tale and legend, close to the gods in the ancient time of the heroes, but also in the aristocratic world of the wellborn who achieve successes in their competitive life; and, as one can see in religious cult and dramatic comedy, he can be found to be a comfortably familiar figure of everyday life. Euripides' play brings something of all these facets of the hero together to tragic effect, which may well be something like a dramatic experiment, bold and risky. This introduction will look at the play's structure; how the hero is characterized by his deeds and by his family relations, human and divine; at the role of the gods and the place of religious practice in the play's action; and, emerging out of all these, the role of poetic performance as the play itself draws our attention to it.

I

The play, while centrally focused on a single heroic figure (as rarely in Euripides¹), is marked by an apparently irregular and sometimes

1. Medea and possibly Hecuba, in the plays named after them, are comparable. The single male heroic figure of Herakles is quite unusual among Euripides' surviving plays (the youths Hippolytos and Ion, in the plays named after them, and Pentheus in *Bakkhai* come closest).

violently surprising dramatic movement. This movement or structure, as in all Attic tragedies, is made out of a number of plot elements or actions, variously combined and transformed. At the start both hero and his family are in mortal danger. The family—old stepfather, wife and three boy children—are on stage, huddled around an altar of Zeus the Savior, a spectacle that signals the familiar plot element of supplication. The helplessness of Herakles' family is occasioned by his absence on the last of his famous Twelve Labors (the descent to Hades to bring back its monstrous guardian dog Cerberus), that is, Herakles' confrontation with death. The supplication plot involves the helpless and weak—often women, children, the old—taking refuge at an altar, putting themselves under a god's protection. Religious and political issues are at stake: Will the deity of the altar provide efficacious protection? Will the human community where the altar is located protect and enforce the altar's sanction? In this instance the human community of Thebes has been at war with itself.² A tyrannical usurper, Lykos, has emerged after assassinating the city's legitimate ruler, Kreon, father of Megara, Herakles' wife, as well as her brothers. In a spirit recalling contemporary political realities,³ Lykos will not put religious scruple above his political self-interest. He means to destroy what remains of his enemies; the children represent future avengers and legitimate claimants to his power. In response to Lykos' threat to remove them violently from the altar's protection, Herakles' wife persuades her reluctant, determinedly hopeful father-in-law, Amphitryon, that the family should give itself up voluntarily for execution and so maintain a semblance of dignity. She also gets from Lykos a concession, to be allowed to dress the children for death. This briefly delays the execution, gets Lykos temporarily off stage and makes possible Herakles' all but too late arrival. The suppliant action, ending in apparent failure, is followed by another set of actions, whose outlines are again drawn

I would like to acknowledge here my debts to many scholars who have written about this play. A particular debt is owed to Helene Foley's *Ritual Irony: Poetry and Sacrifice in Euripides* (Ithaca 1985). My sense of the play's ending is close to Pietro Pucci's strong reading in "Survival in the *Heracles*," an appendix in his *The Violence of Pity in Euripides' Medea* (Ithaca 1980). Anne Michelini's chapter on *Herakles* in her *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison 1987) is also valuable.

2. The civil war in the background of the play's action is a contemporary realistic, not mythic, feature of the play. Intense internal political conflict was endemic to a number of Greek city-states, not least among them Athens where there was a bloody, though short-lived, oligarchic coup in 411 B.C.E. We have no firm date for *Herakles*, but there are grounds for putting it close to the time just preceding that coup, somewhere between 417 and 414.

3. The breakdown of traditional, religiously sanctioned values is vividly expressed by Thucydides, famously at 3.82–84. The great majority of supplications reported by the historian were ineffective or violated.

from a standard repertoire: return (*nostos*) of the hero, rescue or recovery (*sôteria*) and a revenge.⁴ The suppliant story and the rescue dovetail, but the efficacy of the altar's divine sanction is left in doubt. The savior Herakles arrives after the altar is abandoned; Megara says, "He'll be more help to us than Zeus" (680). As for the communal, political support normally expected for the altar's sanction, it has been notably absent.

The rescue is quickly sealed with the revenge killing of Lykos, a double reversal (what Aristotle in the *Poetics* calls *peripeteia*) in which the lives of the helplessly endangered noble family of Herakles are saved, and the dominating criminal usurper Lykos is overthrown and killed. The initial plot structures are played out and the drama might be finished.⁵ This halting of the dramatic movement—not yet half the time of the play has elapsed—is unsettling and might cause what has happened to feel, in retrospect, rather sketchy and perfunctory (though much of importance has been said that remains to be addressed). In parallel with these actions the chorus of old men, citizens of Thebes and supporters of the legitimate royal household, sing and dance their songs, about old age and its weaknesses—their utter helplessness, which links them to Herakles' family, about Herakles' great past achievements, the Twelve Labors—manifestations of extraordinary endurance and victorious strength; and, as rescue and vengeance are done, about the power of youth and the vindication of the gods' justice. Their weakness is offset by the power of their poetic performance and their declaration of enduring dedication to it.

Their last triumphant song is instantly followed by the appearance above the house roof⁶ of two divine figures, and they are abjectly terrified by these unexpected presences looming over them. Divine appearances are normal at the beginning of a play, where they serve as prologue, explaining and foretelling; and at a play's conclusion, where they mark part of a resolution and complement it with prophecy. This abrupt appearance of deities in the middle of the play is a very unusual

4. These patterns are found, for example, in the *Odyssey*, Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and the *Electra* plays of Euripides and Sophocles. In each of these there is also a recognition scene, perhaps suggested in this play by Megara's momentary hesitation in recognizing Herakles (669–70). Revenge in these works involves some kind of deception and ambush, not Herakles' usual mode of action: his initial impulse to use outright force is modified, fitting the pattern (727–37, 750–69).

5. As it is after the sequence of these patterns in, for example, Sophocles' *Electra*.

6. A not uncommon but still striking theatrical effect. Since Iris is said to be coming from and returning to Olympus, that is, on high, the actor playing her part is most likely to have been suspended from the "machine" or crane and swung up and in and out of view above the roof of the stage building representing Herakles' house. Lyssa will enter the house as Iris swings away. She is thus more likely to have stepped out on the roof (from behind the building) and gone off the same way, as if down into the building.

structural feature, an enactment of disruption. Instead of a divine epilogue we get a prologue for a new sequence of events. The dissonances of this moment are underscored by the nature of the deities themselves: two maiden figures, one, Iris (which means rainbow), familiar messenger of the Olympian gods, the other, Lyssa (which means frenzy, raging madness), belonging to a more ancient pre-Olympian world; the first complacently vindictive, the other paradoxically restrained and judicious: two maiden goddesses representing and acting for the mature, enraged and wronged wife of Zeus, Hera. The divine incursion foretells and sets in motion a new action—divine punishment,⁷ the gods' version of a revenge action.

A further, more astonishing *peripeteia* is set in motion. Herakles in his madness becomes the agent of what he had come to prevent. What he had for a moment achieved, a return, a rescue and a revenge, is just as quickly, in the case of the first two, reversed, and, in the case of the latter, revenge, is made to recoil on himself. The initial action of suppliance too, first elided by Herakles' initial rescue, is dreadfully replayed. The children when prepared for execution are presented, with bitter irony, as sacrificial victims: "Where's the priest and his knife?" (594) This marked the apparent failure of the play's opening suppliant action. Now the undoing of the rescue is marked by Herakles' going mad in the process of performing a sacrificial ritual, a formal, technical procedure that involves the slaughtering of animals, intended to purify him after the revenge killing of Lykos and his men. Both the earlier supplication and now the madness-inducing sacrifice take place at an altar of Zeus (59–60, 1269). In the face of Herakles' madness Amphitryon supplicates (1269) and the third, last surviving child assumes the traditional suppliant posture (1292–93) only to become Herakles' final sacrificial victim (1302).

However, the divine "prologue" does not quite prepare us for two further actions. The first is recognition (what Aristotle called *anagnôrisis*), a learning of what is really the case and who one really is.⁸ Herakles, with Amphitryon's help, comes to realize what he has done; he makes an initial recovery from mad delusion and self-alienation. But the process of coming to understanding continues as Herakles wrestles with an identity now threatened after extreme disaster, in desperate

7. Other examples are found in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Euripides' *Hippolytus* and *Bakkhai*.

8. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* dramatizes an outstanding example. This recognition has behind it the traditional notion of knowing oneself as a human being, as mortal and subordinate vis-à-vis the gods. This may be what is meant when Iris says, "It's time he [Herakles] learnt the depths of Hera's rage" (1087).

need of recovery or perhaps redefinition. He first intends to commit suicide to salvage his honor. Then, as the play moves to its conclusion, that decision is reversed (a kind of *peripeteia*, again). Linked with this process is a second action of rescue. Herakles' arrival to rescue his family came for them unexpectedly, in the face of utter despair. Now the Athenian hero Theseus appears unexpectedly, though his recent rescue by Herakles in Hades had been reported—as the cause of Herakles' near-fatal delay in coming to rescue his family (784–85). Herakles' rescue came just in time, only to be utterly negated. Theseus, supposing he was coming to offer help against Lykos, is too late for that, and so perhaps too late to have forestalled the occasion for Herakles' madness. This second rescue, like the process of *anagnôrisis*, is complex. Theseus will offer a refuge in Athens for the hero who is now a polluted killer of his own family and thus forbidden to live in Thebes. But first Herakles must be persuaded to live. Again there is a structural replay: Herakles' wife Megara had persuaded the family to give up hope of rescue and accept death nobly as, she says, Herakles would have wished it. So now Herakles argues for suicide as the honorable response to the condition of his life, which he regards as beyond all hope of redemption. Megara and the family were rescued, as it were, in spite of themselves, and then destroyed. Herakles—and here the story pattern shifts⁹—changes his mind. With Theseus' help he persuades himself to go on living. (Megara had persuaded Amphitryon to give up hope, and he had changed his mind in doing so.) Herakles decides to accept the saving help of Theseus, and by making that decision he becomes again, with Theseus, a rescuing figure—now of himself.

These transmuted actions of recognition and rescue finally conclude with yet one more *peripeteia*, which frames the whole play. The plot was set in motion because of Herakles' absence. His return brings a victory, saving his family and home, and perhaps the city of Thebes. This is followed by defeat and destruction of family and (literally) his house. Coming home Herakles makes himself homeless; his return brings about his departure in exile. The powerful, victorious hero finally leaves the stage defeated and broken, so weak he has to be held up by Theseus. Yet Theseus is there to hold him up and take him to another, adopted home in Athens, which is also the home of Euripides' dramatic production.

9. In Sophocles' *Aias* the great warrior hero, like Herakles, is made mad and humiliated by the gods. Aias, adhering to an older, individualistically sustained heroic code, resists the appeals of those closest to him and commits suicide. On the issues involved see Sumio Yoshitake, "Disgrace, Grief and Other Ills: Heracles' Rejection of Suicide," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 114 (1994): 135–53.

Euripides' play has often been considered structurally flawed, lacking in coherence and unity. In fact it has underlying it a powerful, almost relentlessly repeating and transforming structural procedure. It is not the play's structure that lacks cohesion, it is the whole story, generating the destabilizing transformations and reversals, contained within the play's structure, that threatens a larger coherence of meaning.

II

Herakles is the central figure around whom questions of meaning are raised. One can trace them along two interconnected lines throughout the play: Herakles' traditional, heroic achievements, principally his famous Twelve Labors, and, what may well be a distinctively Euripidean innovation, a various—both mythic and realistically intimate—representation of Herakles' family relationships.

Herakles undertakes the labors traditionally¹⁰ as expiation for killing his children in a fit of madness. But at the start of our play we hear that the labors are performed as payment to Eurystheus, Herakles' cousin and ruler of the region around Argos, so that Amphitryon, once native there and now in exile, might be able to return.¹¹ This arrangement is said to have been instigated by Hera or brought about by necessity, a doubled motivation, both mythic and abstract, that introduces us from the start to the play's characteristically multilayered perspectives on its action: mythic or legendary, abstract and rationalistic, contemporaneous—historical and political, and personal or psychological. It is, then, Herakles' own individual choice to undertake the labors on behalf of his human foster father.

The first labors we hear about are two of the best known, killing the Nemean Lion and destroying the many-headed Hydra. But we hear about them from Herakles' enemy Lykos who debunks and trivializes them as mythic exaggerations irrelevant to the uses of the human community, the city-state (*polis*). Lykos also goes on to attack Herakles' iconic weapon, the bow, as a coward's, good only on one's individual behalf, in contrast to the shield and spear of those fighting with true

10. The traditions are fluid. The majority of the labors are essentially folktale material where motivations are a mix of the mysteriously necessary and arbitrary. Tasks are imposed on the (young) hero so that he may prove himself. Herakles' exploits extend into his maturity, which gives him more weight as an individualized heroic figure. On Herakles' traditional story material and its development see, for example, Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979).

11. The cause of Amphitryon's exile is his killing of Alkmene's father Elektryon who is his uncle as well as his father-in-law. This exile for kin-killing prefigures Herakles' killing of his own family and his subsequent exile. Herakles' labors, which will end in his madness, are contingent on Amphitryon's crime (3562–64).

courage in the close, interdependent combat of hoplite formation. Having the politically and morally villainous Lykos argue effectively for a positive, communal ideology is a characteristically disconcerting Euripidean move. One might tentatively see it as pre-emptive. From a realistic, contemporary point of view the exaggerations of mythic stories are acknowledged, yet, because this realism is articulated by an otherwise negative figure, symbolic weight and space for the myth's expressive fantasy is still allowed. In defending Herakles' reputation and his use of the bow Amphitryon briefly refers to an association of Herakles with the gods' mythic world, but then, as though admitting the irrelevance of such a world, he adopts the rationalizing terms of Lykos' argument. Amphitryon's arguments, though, thus make Herakles' use of his fabulous bow seem no more than a calculated stance. And, more pointedly, the play's subsequent events will show the drastic inadequacy of such rationalism. Herakles' madness will be the terrible refutation of Amphitryon's claim, at the center of his argument, that the bow makes the hero's autonomy possible. Focus on the bow in this debate also evokes for a moment a facet of Herakles' traditional and archaic character as heroic hunter,¹² a role played at the margins of human communities, in the wild, among threatening, often monstrous animals, in a realm of initiatory activities and stories. Early in the play, however, Herakles' image is drawn into a contemporary political and intellectual world at odds with his older, traditional heroic character. Euripides is asking what can such a hero mean to us [Athenians] now?

After the exchange between Lykos and Amphitryon Herakles' family give up all hope of the hero's return. They despair at what they have been persuaded are the limits of his mythic prowess. In contrast a long choral ode follows, amply filling the mythic space, sung and danced by the old Theban citizens who are deeply loyal to the hero and his family. But they too assume Herakles' death. Their ode is a poetic memorial and a dirge, finely wrought and archaically stylized. The effect is of distancing or at least a retrospective view. The splendor of the labors debunked by Lykos is reasserted. Herakles' exploits are often those of a culture hero who has made the world safer from the forces of a violent wildness—including the alternative community of Amazons against whom he has led an expedition, asserting an ideological hierarchy of differences between Greek male and "barbarian" female warriors. In several labors the hero does the gods service (though

12. Archaic examples are Orion and Actaeon. Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, as master of the bow, has assimilated this role, among his others. In his madness Herakles will become hunter again, of his own family (see 1270–72). On the background and implications of Herakles as bowman see Helene Foley, *Ritual Irony*, 169–75.

Athena, often his patron deity, is notably absent: she will appear later in the play). Other labors, the quest for the golden apples and for “the triple-bodied herdsman,” called Geryon, as well as for Hades’ dog Cerberus, touch on themes of transcendence—immortality and the afterlife. Herakles’ involvement with wild forces also leads to their appropriation. He brings them back from his journeys, or a part of them. The lion provides his distinguishing dress, its skin on his back, its head covering his own. The Hydra supplies the poison for his arrows.

The celebration of the labors stops short of the last, the descent to Hades to get Cerberus. The chorus assumes that Herakles has at last failed. But he does return, though, as it turns out, bringing Hades—death—back with him. This last labor is the fulcrum of the play’s action. It also makes the intersection of a mythic world, celebrated in the choral song, with the more immediate, realistic world of family and politics visible to the audience on stage. Herakles’ absence during the Hades journey triggers the play’s initial crisis, his family’s dilemma. When he actually appears on stage, Megara has to reassure herself that he’s not a ghost, not a “dream flickering in the sun” (674). Amphitryon will even ask if Herakles *really* went to Hades (776). But the final requirement of this labor, that Cerberus be brought to Eurystheus, is not yet fulfilled. This delay in finishing the labor, motivated by Herakles’ desire to learn first about his family’s condition (783), makes possible his being just in time to save them from Lykos (balancing his being almost too late because of taking the time to rescue his friend Theseus in Hades).

Herakles’ first response to what he finds at home also links the traditional, heroic mode, in all its violence—he proposes singlehandedly to tear down Lykos’ palace, kill and decapitate him and slaughter all Thebans who had owed him support but failed to provide it—to more familiar realities. Strikingly too the hero measures what he owes his own family against his great mythic achievements. His enemy Lykos had scathingly contrasted the fabulous labors of lion and hydra with the exercise of civic military values. Herakles now contrasts these same two labors (just previously celebrated without qualification by the chorus) with his ability to save his family and his willingness to share the risk of death they have endured on his account. Euripides draws his great hero, unusually, into an intimate domestic family orbit. Herakles asserts an equality among human beings, irrespective of status or wealth, on the basis of a universal human affection for children (799–804).

After Lykos is killed the chorus blend Herakles’ older and immediate achievements into a continuing series. Lykos, so far a purely secular

figure, joins the company of conquered dangerous beasts (his name, meaning wolf, is, so to speak, activated). But they do not sing about the saving of Herakles' family, insisting instead on the justice done with the downfall of Lykos and the restoration of the city's legitimate authority.¹³ They appear to be bracketing the exceptional character of Herakles' assertions about his labors and his love for his children. Perhaps too they are made to anticipate in this way the oncoming demonstration of a highly problematic gap between heroic and domestic values.

In the divine prologue to Herakles' killing of his children Iris links the hero's labors, now called bitter contests, to the infanticide. The labors appear now as a precondition of Herakles' downfall, a heroic achievement allowed so that it can be crushed by greater powers. This prologue indicates, perhaps irreconcilably, both a greater backdrop for Herakles' destiny and his destiny's peculiarly specific conditions. A kind of cosmic or natural hierarchy and balance may be suggested, which the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximander had called *dikê* (justice or the way of things). Mixed with this, and more explicit, is an archaic religious perspective in which Herakles is made into an example of the impossibility of human autonomy where divine powers are active. Cosmic nature is suggested by Iris as rainbow and Lyssa as raging turbulence, daughter of Night and Heaven who invokes the Sun (1107). Lyssa uses the language of natural cataclysm, ocean storms, earthquake and thunderbolt (112–14, see also 1195) to describe what will happen to Herakles. On the other hand, Iris says that the basic distinction of divine and human will disappear if Herakles "doesn't pay the penalty" or "render justice (*dikê*).¹⁴ Yet Lyssa protests on Herakles' behalf in the name of a normative, social principle of justice based (as was Anaximander's cosmic justice) on the notion of reciprocity. Why is Herakles paying a penalty when he has "brought the wild powers of the earth to heel / And leveled the waves of the storming sea" and "raised up the honors of the gods / That the arrogance of human beings knocked aside" (1099–1102)? She recalls in summary both what the labors achieved and the recent killing of the impious Lykos. No answer is forthcoming to the question she raises. We have instead a raw, unresolved clash of human and divine spheres. Herakles will succumb to what is both cosmic justice and a malevolent power represented in

13. The chorus seem overenthusiastic in this. They call Herakles "our king" (951, cf. 982 and 1049–50). But he says nothing about any claim to rule in Thebes, nor do his traditional stories. The play indicates that Lykos had a substantial following in the city. As the play progresses Thebes' political problems fall into the background; one assumes they remain unresolved. The fortunes of the city and of Herakles' family are kept apart (770–71, 1067–68).

grossly anthropomorphic terms that are also family terms. The high religious law of retribution is embodied in the jealous rage of the offended wife of Zeus.

A divine father is a way of accounting for the extraordinary capacities of heroic figures. But the mix of human and divine is problematic and ambivalent. Herakles' actual, so to speak, biological father is the divine Zeus. His human mother is Alkmene. He has a human foster father in Amphitryon and a divine stepmother in Zeus' wife Hera. Herakles himself is a bastard with no fixed origin in one or another community.¹⁴ There is in this family configuration a pattern of crossing categories: human and divine; male and female; "real," or according to nature and what one might call functional or socially legitimated. At issue too are absence and presence and differing modes of perception and knowing: what is imagined and what is visible, that is, what is represented by language and reported myth and what is dramatically present and witnessed on stage. Thus the "real" father, Zeus, is notably absent, invisible and uninvolved; though much called on he never shows any signs of himself. Alkmene, the biological, human mother, is simply absent.¹⁵ Those who are effectively present are the human substitute father and the divine stepmother. For the events of the drama they are the functional figures, and contrast sharply. Amphitryon (on stage more than any one else in the play) is old and physically helpless, yet in

14. In Athens, starting in the latter part of the fifth century B.C.E., one could only be a citizen with full legal and political rights if both parents were Athenian citizens. From an Athenian viewpoint Herakles is illegitimate not only as the issue of an adulterous union but also because he has one parent from Olympos the other from Thebes. One of his best known cults, in the Attic district of Kynosarges, was reserved exclusively for illegitimately born sons.

15. She must be presumed dead. Usually, as for example in Euripides' *Children of Herakles*, she survives her son. Her absence, on the one hand, highlights and isolates Hera's relationship to Herakles. On the other hand, Alkmene as a potentially supporting female figure is replaced in the earlier part of the play by the strongly independent figure of Megara. References to Alkmene in the play are very few: Lykos and Iris are scornful of her; Herakles refers to her in despair on account of her adultery with Zeus; the chorus invoke her positively only once, as granddaughter of the hero Perseus and mother of Zeus's son.

The configurations of Herakles' family make an interesting comparison with those in Euripides' *Ion*, a play probably produced within a few years after *Herakles*. The young Ion, hero to be, is presumed an illegitimate orphan child. He turns out to be the son of the god Apollo and a human mother, the Athenian queen Kreousa. As in Herakles' case these roles are doubled, but with significant differences. Ion gets a surrogate human father, Xouthos, and has had a foster mother (or stepmother) who is human, though a virgin priestess of Apollo (and as such outside of the normal structures of family and marriage). The human father is deceived into believing that he is the real father (thus averting social and political scandal and disadvantage). The stepmother is a benign and rescuing figure. Apollo, the divine father, though distant, still manages—through others and with some hitches, but in the end successfully—to set things right. In this story of the Athenian ruling house, the female and mother figures are integrated into a final action of rescue and return, even though Kreousa had twice misguidedly tried to kill the child she once did and then did not know was hers.

words and feeling, however imperfectly, an untiring source of support for the hero and his family, sustaining hope at the start, defending Herakles' reputation in argument and, after the catastrophe, helping to guide Herakles gently out of his madness. Herakles will consider him as "true father . . . more than this Zeus!" (1570). Hera, though never visible on stage, is represented by deities who, even if in an archaizing poetic and dramaturgical style that might suggest some ironic distance, make a theatrically indelible impression. Everyone on stage will attribute what they set in motion directly and feelingly to Hera. The human, old, weak, all but helpless yet emotionally supportive figure is countered by a divine, mature, powerful and malevolently destructive one. Each also crosses gender stereotypes. Amphitryon's part suggests a concerned mother's, Hera's a competitive and punishing father's. Herakles himself is represented movingly as father and husband, then both roles are destroyed. Though his descendants, the Herakleidae, are notable in myth and ideological history, here he survives only as a son. He will try to cast himself as father to Theseus after he has lost his own children (1759), but he leaves the stage finally like "a little boat in tow" after Theseus, as his own children had been "the smaller boats" in tow after him (1784, 798).

These confusions and subversions of normal roles are part of the ambivalent fabric of tragedy. The anomalous family structure as well as the relation of hero as hero to family are involved. Herakles' heroic identity requires deeds of force and violence, carried out usually far from home. When he comes home to save his family and be with them, looking forward to passing on his fame, his heroic example, to his sons, the heroic identity, with its divine baggage, will not adapt; it self-destructs. One might suppose that Herakles brings home the craziness that makes great warriors and that his madness, a caricature of his heroic behavior, is psychologically plausible. But the play does not encourage this view. It insists on a more traditional, and more opaque, connection between the gods' power and the hero's identity. What happens to that identity when its victorious course has come to an end, one could say when the gods are done with Herakles, is the burden of the play's last phase.

After the catastrophic killing of his family Herakles determines to kill himself, then he is moved to reconsider and chooses to go on living. This change of mind evolves through a debate with Theseus. In making his argument for suicide Herakles looks back over his life and declares it to have been no life at all, "a botch." (1561) The basis of his family line, irregular from the start, led only to trouble. His famed achievements—he mentions his infant feat of strangling serpents put into his

cradle by Hera, four labors (again lion and hydra, also centaurs and Hades) and his battle on the side of the Olympian gods against the monster Typhon and the Giants—are no more than instances of his life's wretchedness. "Labor" (the Greek word is *ponos*¹⁶) refers to what is achieved by hard, determined effort as well as to the pain and misery such effort may bring with it. In the first case labor is bound up with producing social values and is rewarded by fame; in the second case it is only abject suffering and a potential source of ignominy. Herakles now only sees, and feels, the latter. He joins child-killing to the sequence of his traditionally celebrated labors, calling it his last labor, his culminating misery. Iris, with fierce irony, had forecast the infanticide calling it "the crown of all his [Herakles'] labors" (1086). Herakles acknowledges this subversion of his heroic life's meaning. Suicide seems the only logical response. It also implies an autonomous action dictated by no outside force.

But it will not happen. One could say that Herakles' traditional stories, known to everyone, will not allow the figure on stage to do what he has argued is his only choice. The focus and emotional force of the drama on stage must allow the audience to suspend their fuller knowledge of those stories. But the play does draw specific attention to a kind of framing around the dramatic figure of Herakles: the hero's familiar presence in actual Athenian cult activities, his association with shrines and his representation on monuments. In trying to persuade Herakles to go on living Theseus offers to take him to Athens to be purified of the pollution from the bloodshed of his kin. In addition Theseus offers a share of his property, including sacred precincts, and he promises, after Herakles' death, sacrificial honors and monuments. This is etiology, a common Euripidean practice, linking figures in a drama to a contemporary cult and thus anchoring the fluid, onetime only dramatic material of a play to permanent or ever repeating real-life, social-religious practices. This usually takes place at a play's end as part of an epilogue. Herakles' etiology here, though, is closely bound up with the play's ongoing action and the hero's confrontation with his identity.

The etiology is a reminder of a Herakles familiar to Athenians as a strong, protective and victorious figure whose cults are sites of genial festivity—a figure similar to the one celebrated by the chorus after Lykos' defeat. This consolatory perspective, however, is in strong ten-

16. On *ponos* and its relation to Herakles see Nicole Loraux, *The Experiences of Tiresias* (Princeton 1995): 44–58. This book is also to be recommended for its account of the figure of Herakles in classical Greek culture.

sion with the drama before us. If Herakles' heroic life is shown to have no meaning, to be helplessly subject to uncontrollable forces, whether called gods or chance, what might this say about the hero whom Athens celebrates? Or what might it say about the coherence and viability of Athenian cult and the wider social fabric of which it was part?¹⁷ Giving Herakles asylum in Athens may also be seen as belonging to an ideologically colored, yet also strongly ambivalent, pattern found in other tragedies. Taking in Herakles Athens displays her openness, her enlightened and generous support of heroes who have been driven into exile because of deeply polluting crimes: the matricide Orestes, the incestuous parricide Oedipus, the infanticide Medea. These figures bring their ambiguous fame to the city and enhance hers, and their pollution may work as a kind of inoculation for its host community as well as a source of the religious power inherent in the ambivalence of accursed and sacred. Like the etiology this is a perspective on the play's horizon, put to the city's service, while still suggesting the mysterious opacity of divine involvement in heroic life.

On stage Athens' representative is Theseus, but he acts more on his own account than the city's. He is moved by personal friendship and a debt due for the saving of his life. He is also shown as weak and ordinary. He is generous and devoted toward Herakles, but we also know that he signally failed on a private adventure in Hades from which he had to be rescued. His arguments are conventional: misfortune is universal, one must endure it; Herakles should live up to his reputation as the great hero of Greece. Herakles responds to the friendship and generosity but not to the arguments: "My troubles . . . what have they got to do with all your talk?" (1673). The hero changes his mind on as near to his own terms as he can manage. He decides to go on living because he thinks of his reputation as a warrior who, because of his human mortality,¹⁸ must not give way even in extreme adversity. Concern for a soldier's reputation, for a civic role, outweighs living with the infamy of having killed one's own family. But the pull between asserting a warrior's identity and the intense grief felt at its private cost is strong. Herakles, as he says, succumbs for the first time in his life to tears (1693–94, and see 1752). In his long speech of decision

17. I raise these questions hypothetically. We have no sure way of addressing them, but they do suggest themselves.

18. The theme of mortality is part of the play's movement toward a kind of humanistic realism, a sense of life apart from divine and heroic myth. But that movement is only partial, and here there may also be an allusion to an older, epic heroic code in which human mortality is the basis of life-risking action for the sake of immortal fame. This is Achilles' story in the *Iliad* (see also *Iliad* 12.322–28).

the central portion is taken up by lament for his family and instructions to his father for their funeral. He invokes, then, in one breath the "bitter sweetness" of last kisses for his dead wife and children and the "bitter companionship" of the weapons that are both the mark of his warrior identity and, vividly personified as physical and speaking presences, the killers of his sons. His bow, arrows and club have been lying on the ground beside him from the time he emerged from his madness (1402-3). Now he hesitates between leaving them and picking them up. In a theatrically marked gesture he does the latter. Herakles states that with these weapons he achieved glory in Greece and that without them he would risk ignominious death at his enemies' hands. He suggests a kind of blend of a civic, military model of behavior (what Lykos had invoked in his attack on Herakles' reputation) and his traditional identity as the Panhellenic hero of the labors, the identity he had just drastically devalued. The weapons tie him more firmly to the latter, though. The issue of fame or reputation and of disgrace joins the two. The possibility of Herakles' enduring fame is derived from his mythic and heroic status, his disgrace from his domestic catastrophe. The former exists as poetic tradition in imagination and song, the latter is witnessed dramatically on stage. The heroic deeds are Herakles' independent achievement, it would appear; the killing of his family was beyond his control. Yet the goddess Hera is an inextricable thread between the deeds and the killing. Herakles' speech of decision ends with her (1751). Embedded in his name she is always part of him. That name means Hera's fame. That is, he is both famous and infamous on her account. Or, to put it another way, the contradictions inherent in the hero's being must be attributable to a divine source.

Herakles' reference to Hera is the last time a deity is mentioned in the play. The play ends entirely within a human sphere, which also is ambivalent (and thus the more affecting). Theseus tries to strengthen Herakles' resolve by recalling the heroic labors (and this is the last time they are mentioned), only to have Herakles revert to his despair of their worth in the face of what he now suffers (1768-69). Herakles then calls up the memory of the Athenian hero's wretchedness in Hades, which causes Theseus to admit that there he himself was "Less than the meanest soul" (1774). Both heroes are brought close to an ordinary humanity. The play's concluding theme is friendship. Herakles extols it above wealth and power. But this oversimplifies. It is Theseus' wealth, won by service to his city (1655-57), and Athens' power that makes this friendship viable. Yet a look back will recall that friendship has also been shown as helpless (the chorus, Amphitryon, Lyssa), unreliable

(the citizens of Thebes, the Greek world) or simply absent where expected (Zeus). Friendship, *philia* in Greek, is a wide-ranging notion, comprising social and political alignments as well as the mutual ties and obligations of kin and personal relations of feeling. This last is, as the play implies, hazardingly contingent on the rest.

The play's concluding action, departure for the haven of Athens, is also hedged by a detour. At the start we were waiting for Herakles to complete his last labor, bringing the monster dog Cerberus back from Hades to Eurystheus in Argos. At the end that task has still to be completed. Because of the loss of his children Herakles does not trust himself emotionally to carry it out alone; he asks for Theseus' help (1741–45). The shadow of Hades, of things having to do with death, is cast over the length of the play. There are, from beginning to end, journeys to and from Hades, impending death, dirges and laments, dressing for death, killings, corpses, funeral and burial arrangements, contemplation of suicide. The horizon of Herakles' future seems also to include little else. *No further heroic achievements are so much as hinted at.* The cult honors he is to receive in Athens are predicated on his death, when he descends "to Hades" (1662–63),¹⁹ one last time. The final lines of the play chanted by the chorus are a lament for the *loss* of Herakles, the greatest of friends. The audience may remind itself that this is Thebes' loss. It should be Athens' gain, but only as foretold, to be realized outside of the drama that has been witnessed.

III

At the heart of the tragedy there is subversion. Presumed norms of order are called into question: the coherence of mythic and heroic values, political order, the relationship of public and private life. Religion and poetry are part of this too. The first through the gods of myth, as recounted and dramatized, especially where questions are raised about justice or theodicy, and through reference to the relationship of gods and humans in the actual religious practices of cult ritual. The issue of poetry is acutely involved because Euripides' drama and its language are the means by which all these subversions are represented, and this poetry is itself part of a normative tradition.

19. Notice too the imagery of Hades in the account of Herakles' madness, and his supposing himself to be back in Hades when he awakes from his madness (1406–10). Hades is also mentioned as a realm, connected to the goddesses Persephone and Demeter, where the salvation of the Eleusinian Mysteries is available. At line 779 Herakles refers to his being initiated. Reference to these mysteries, though made in passing and eclipsed by the action that follows, constitutes another link to Athenian cult life.

Among the gods two link Herakles' story to Athens. Athena, offstage, brings Herakles' madness to an end, with a violence appropriate to it, hurling a rock at his chest. (This rock, "inducing a sane mind," was reportedly shown as a sacred relic in a sanctuary of Herakles in Thebes.) Amphitryon confusedly sees her action as a hellish earthquake (1195–97), but it saves Herakles from killing him (1309–15) and so could be seen as forecasting Athens' role in providing a refuge for the hero and a way to support his decision to go on living. The goddess does again recall Herakles' ambivalent relationship to the gods. She is called "child of Zeus" (1189–90)—as he had been (192, 890–91)—just when his human vulnerability is ineluctably demonstrated.

Another connection to Athens is through Dionysos (again, a child of Zeus). Like the Herakles of the Athenian cult Dionysos is associated in the city with joyous festivity. The chorus set the two side by side in their song, "for Herakles / To crown his victor's brow. / As long as Bakkhos keeps on / Splashing out wine . . ." (870–71). But god and hero are subject to tragic inversion. Herakles' madness is represented as Dionysiac. Madness [Lyssa] dances like a Dionysian celebrant through Herakles' house (1179–81). Dionysiac imagery runs through the account of Herakles' frenzied actions (1266–67, 1388–89, 1430, 1450). He is called a Bakkhic celebrant from Hades, "drunk—on death" (1427). The Dionysiac power linked to madness, that destroys his family and, in some sense, himself, manifests itself in Thebes.²⁰ But as god of the theater Dionysos is connected to Athens in the city's great festival for him, the Dionysia, an essential part of which included the performance of this play. A kind of self-referencing points to this connection. Herakles' madness is represented as alienated mimetic action. He is described miming a journey from Thebes to Argos, and then he casts his own family in the role of his enemy Eurystheus'. His family and the household slaves are at first spectators, the latter not knowing whether to laugh or be afraid. Then this play within a play goes badly wrong. The boundaries between actor and on-stage audience are erased. Illusion, of which Dionysos is a master, becomes ruinous delusion. Herakles' Dionysiac madness is also an image of subverted theater.

Hera is the last named deity in the play, Zeus the first. He is immediately introduced as Herakles' father and then in a cult function:

20. As commonly in Attic tragedy Thebes and Athens are antithetical mythical constructs, Thebes being the tragically subverted city serving as a foil to an idealized Athens. On this see Froma I. Zeitlin, "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin, eds., *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?* (Princeton 1990): 130–167; and Froma I. Zeitlin, "Staging Dionysus between Thebes and Athens," in Thomas H. Carpenter and Christopher A. Faraone, eds., *Masks of Dionysus* (Ithaca 1993): 147–182.

the theater altar is identified as belonging to Zeus the Rescuer.²¹ It was dedicated by his son. But the altar proves to be useless; Herakles was the rescuer. We later learn about another altar to Zeus inside the house (1211), where Herakles attempts a purification ceremony only to be struck down by the madness ordered by Hera. Zeus' role as father is addressed by Amphitryon. The god, having "borrowed" Amphitryon's wife and thus made himself closest kin to Herakles' family, is doubly indebted. He should be a friend (*philos*), especially in time of need. If he is not, Amphitryon says in an unusual indictment, his heart is "hard," failing in moral feeling or "Without justice." Amphitryon, human and mortal, claims a higher moral status than the "great" god's (381-92). Zeus falls outside the reach of humanly conceived morality (compare also 830-31). This asymmetry between divine power and human moral expectations, expectations that the gods are traditionally meant to enforce, is especially pointed because Zeus is regarded as most particularly concerned with justice. That justice is understood at least as having to do with a larger structure of order, among gods and between gods and human beings. Divine justice is celebrated by the chorus after the defeat of Lykos. It is attributed to the gods in general and its manifestation is taken to confirm that Zeus is the true father of Herakles. The god seems somehow to be a *philos* after all and is proved to be the divine source of the hero's noble greatness. This realignment of the claims of human morality with a turn of events that the chorus attributes to the gods turns out to be as temporary as can be. The word *just* has barely been sung (1058) when Iris and Lyssa appear. The gods may have something to do with punishing the wicked, but this says nothing about rewards for the good. Herakles, who carries out Lykos' punishment, is made mad. That Lykos is punished could be attributed simply to Herakles' superiority as a warrior and the lucky timing of his arrival-back in Thebes. What Iris calls his punishment is attributed to Hera, and the meaning or justice of it, as noted earlier, is obscure. Iris does explain that Zeus and Necessity (or Destiny; compare lines 30-31) had protected Herakles from Hera until the labors were finished. Now Zeus can do nothing. He himself is subject to a higher, more abstract force that for the moment allows Hera to have her way. The unfolding of Zeus' uselessness runs parallel with the fading and transforming of the traditional heroic figure of Herakles.

Zeus provides an initial condition of the play's story. Herakles finally

21. This is imagined for the play in Thebes. There was in fact a building and statue in Athens dedicated to Zeus the Rescuer. See Jon D. Mikalson, "Zeus the Father and Heracles the Son," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 116 (1986) 89-98, esp. 90 n. 2.

reduces him, alluding ironically perhaps to a standard prayer formula, to a "whoever" (1567) and holds Amphitryon to be his father (1569–70). The immediate driving force of the story is Hera. Her involvement is vivid and direct. No one questions it or who she is. Herakles cannot shake her off. He can only cry out in outrage and disgust: "Who would stoop so low as / To pray to such a goddess?" (1630–31) Zeus perhaps represents the inscrutability of divine power intellectually, Hera unquestionably represents it emotionally. We recall too how each deity is cast in family and gender roles: the remote, inaccessible father and the angry, resentful, all too involved stepmother.

The most direct discussion of the gods occurs between the speeches of Theseus and Herakles when the latter decides to go on with his broken life. Theseus uses the same anthropomorphic terms that Amphitryon had in his challenge to Zeus. The gods, he says, do and suffer bad things—lawless sexual unions and repressive violence against fathers, yet their life on Olympus goes on. So should Herakles, only a mortal, endure his life. The form of the argument as consolation is conventional enough and as a kind of rationalizing it has a contemporary resonance.²² But it is awkward, creating something like a cognitive dissonance. The underlying point is that misfortune comes to all beings and there is no choice but to submit. To this Herakles essentially agrees (1695, 1750–51). The gods too are subject to a greater and indeterminate power, the uncontrollable turn of events called *tukhê*, (what happens). But surely we notice that the argument's examples do not fit. Misfortune comes to Herakles against his will while the gods chose to inflict theirs on each other. Within this play too there is no hint of sexual irregularity on Herakles' part, and he has devoted his life to serving both his fathers. One might think of Zeus' adultery with Herakles' human mother (but Theseus' example refers only to gods) and violence in the family to assert power (but by Hera against the human Herakles). Theseus' argument could imply that sexual drives and the forceful pursuit of power are universal, apart from any distinction of human and divine. Herakles, at any rate, responds first with a cry of anguish and then a dismissal of what Theseus has proposed. But he cannot let the argument go. He asserts a belief that the gods have nothing to do with illicit sex and power relations; true deity is free of such constraints, "Needing nothing" (1678). Euripides here draws on pre-Socratic (the philosopher-poet Xenophanes) and more recent (the

22. There is a particularly harsh instance in the argument Thucydides represents the Athenians making for their takeover of the island of Melos: they cite the example of the gods to justify their unrestricted exercise of military power for the sake of political domination (Thucydides, 5.105.2). See also Godfrey W. Bond, ed., Euripides, *Heracles* (Oxford 1981): 393.

Sophist Antiphon) speculative thinking—which will be taken up by Plato and Epicurus. But what Herakles asserts would undercut his whole story by denying the mythic configurations that shape it. And that story will not go away. His speculative challenge to myth is emotionally and dramatically overcome or bypassed. A vision of deity untainted by human characteristics is given striking expression and then left suspended. Herakles himself will end his speech with a cry against Hera, a goddess who could not have existed as a goddess in his theology.

Myth and its gods are indispensable to tragic drama. They provide both some sense of coherence through a story line, the causation of narrative, and are a kind of emblem of the human psyche as it is irreducible to rational accounting. Herakles' theology is a challenge to the drama itself, a challenge met at least by the fact that the drama continues. Euripides has folded into this deeply dramatic moment of his play a metadrama about his function as dramatic poet. Both Theseus and Herakles, the one using myth, the other denying it, refer questioningly to poets: they might be lying (1642); their accounts are "wretched," that is, responsible for false representations of the gods (1680). This suggests a competition between poetry and speculative thought in which poetry subsumes the latter while maintaining its own power of fictional creation, a power, though, acknowledged to be ambivalent.

In Herakles one may also see that his view of the divine here could refer to himself. Where Theseus calls up an image of heroic submission and endurance, Herakles attributes to true divinity an autonomy and self-sufficiency that might have defined his own heroism, but that is now utterly lost to him.

Herakles' theology isolates the gods and thereby undermines two working assumptions of Greek ritual practice, that the gods are involved in human affairs, for good or ill (ritual seeks to encourage the one and abate the other), and that there is some reciprocity between gods and humans; both notions are basic to sacrifice, for example (they were also presupposed by *Amphitryon's* earlier indictment of Zeus).²³ But ritual is a substantial part of the play's dramatic fabric. As noted, it is mostly shown as failed or perverted: supplication doesn't work, sacrifice goes very wrong, Bakkhic celebration turns murderous. Though this might appear to risk a subversion of actual religious practice, the dramatically enacted subversion can give richer definition to what is represented as

23. See Harvey Yunis, *A New Creed: Fundamental Religious Beliefs in the Athenian Polis and Euripidean Drama* (Göttingen 1988).

subverted. The representation of ritual gone awry is a generally familiar feature of Greek tragedy. That in addition the drama is itself part of a ritual and civic occasion (Dionysos' festival) suggests that actual ritual is not so much challenged as dramatized in its ambivalent power, and may in fact in this way be reinforced.

In the play poetry is also represented as intrinsic to ritual performance, especially in the singing and dancing of the chorus who regularly signal self-referentially what they are doing: for example, performing a dirge to music modeled on Apollo's (399–406, compare 132–33); invoking to celebrate victory the Muses, Dionysos and the music of lyre and pipe (856–87); performing a paean, a song of thanksgiving and victory, like the maidens at Delos worshiping Apollo (878–91); and calling for ritual dance and festivity in Thebes (971–78). All this is before Herakles' catastrophe. After it is forecast by Iris and Lyssa the chorus' vision sees their dance and music taken over and perverted by the mad hero: "The dances are beginning . . . not the dances / Of the god of wine . . . The pipe keeps shrieking / Notes of ruin" (1163–78). The chorus sing only one more formal song, although nearly a third of the play is still to come. This song is their shortest, disturbed and rhythmically irregular (there is no usual balance of corresponding stanzas). It is a shocked response that compares the greater enormity of Herakles' mad crime to the daughters of Danaos' killing their forty-nine bridegrooms and the Athenian princess Prokne's killing of her one son (1329–33). These mythic parallels (like the ones Theseus uses in trying to persuade Herakles to live) are suggestively and unsettlingly oblique. The crimes cited apply to Herakles insofar as they concern spouse and child killing respectively. But they are committed by women who have deliberately plotted them, if under great duress. Herakles, the man, is declared simply doomed to madness (1336–37) and acts for no cause of his own, unwittingly. Prokne's slaughter of her child, quite remarkably, is called sacrificing to the Muses (1334–35). There is here a tragic nexus of ritual and poetry (in the context of an Athenian story too). As with Herakles, intrafamilial killing is represented as perverted ritual. The reference to the Muses may recall that because of her crime Prokne was turned into the beautifully singing nightingale. In the myth this was an act of the gods; in effect it is a poetic invention, a kind of rescue operation for a hideous crime whereby the crime is powerfully registered while poetry asserts its power, and indeed draws it from the very horror of the crime. Euripides' play as a whole does something like this with the tragedy of Herakles, but, one might say, more realistically. Herakles occasions the beautiful songs of the chorus, then the hero's devastating ruin puts an

end to them. Just after their short formal song the chorus refer one last time to their ritual activity, asking what lament or dirge they might sing or what dance of Hades they might perform (1338–41). There is no hope of an answer. They and their poetry, traditional and close to ritual, are overtaken by the story's events. For what remains of the play they are almost completely silent and motionless.

Yet the play goes on, moving through an extended conclusion in which its hero, with his companion's help, wrestles with how after utter catastrophe one can go on. Herakles tries to put the greatest distance possible between himself and the mythic, divine forces who seem to be the cause of his unjust downfall. Theseus tries to recall the hero to his previous greatness and, not without contradiction, to his human mortality, so that the two might be joined in the strength for endurance. What we see on stage allows neither effort easily to be regarded as a success. Divine power is overwhelming and unaccountable, undeniable in its effects, and necessary for the whole story to be told. Herakles' strength at the end is disturbingly fragile and completely dependent. We are left with the emotional impact of that. Out of this bleakness some balancing—consoling is perhaps too much to say—factors remain. To the extent that the gods are distanced, humanity emerges in sharper relief and definition. The figures on stage at the end have been drawn—forced—to a greater self-reliance, at the ideal center of which is friendship. The gods of myth are both devastating and yet also distanced. They could be seen as extreme cases in both their violence and lack of care. Yet their power may also be partly channeled and regularized in ritual that, though perverted within the play, outside of it is still glimpsed as part of a civic community's ordered life. The humane Theseus makes an unusual personal disavowal of the effects of pollution from Herakles' hands stained by the blood of his kin (1521–25, 1537–39, 1758). But the play allows no question about the religious and civic law requiring the hero's exile from Thebes and his ritual purification for the pollution he has unintentionally incurred (see 1652). Though they can hardly be forgotten, at the end of the play there is no more talk of gods. We are left with the work of Euripides' dramatic poetry, which has included and then moved past the traditional singing and dancing of his chorus. This poetry, like the figure of Herakles, is shown to be part of a tradition that has become unsettlingly fragile and in need of readaptation. Euripides has somehow, perhaps just barely, held the threads of the drama together, has made the play possible, and sent its action home to Athens.

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ON THE TRANSLATION

I wanted a line that could embody swift shifts in mood and thought, whose nimbleness and speed kept pace with the play's sudden reversals and disasters. In the speeches, I generally used a pentameter-based line frequently broken up into smaller units and a trimeter-based line for the choruses. When the original or my English demanded it, I've broken with this scheme, particularly in the alternating, single lines of dialogue known as *stichomythia*. (In the case of turnover lines, short turnover lines are aligned flush right. To avoid long turnover lines, I've indented the entire line to the left so that the line can fit within the bounds of the right margin.)

I've benefited from Christian Wolff's literal version of the play and his corrections and suggestions. I've also consulted many other versions and/or commentaries, especially those of Godfrey Bond, Michael Hal-leran, William Arrowsmith, and Shirley Barlow.

My hope is that this translation will live on both the page and the contemporary stage. What I've attempted to do is reimagine Euripides' play from the inside, to get the feel and timbre of the characters' voices, and to embody those voices in a way that doesn't violate the spirit of Euripides' Greek. At the same time, I've tried to make those voices over into contemporary English full of the nuances and subtleties, the intimate qualities of morals and mind, of each character's individual habits of speech.

Tom Sleigh

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HERAKLES

CHARACTERS

AMPHITRYON Herakles' foster father

MEGARA Herakles' wife

CHORUS of Theban Elders

LYKOS the usurping power in Thebes

HERAKLES son of Zeus and Alkmene, foster son of Amphitryon

IRIS messenger of the gods

MADNESS

MESSENGER

THESEUS ruler of Athens

HERAKLES' THREE SONS

Followers of Lykos and of Theseus

Line numbers in the right-hand margin of the text refer to the English translation only, and the Notes on the text at p. 93 are keyed to these lines. The bracketed line numbers in the running head lines refer to the Greek text.

HERAKLES

Outside of HERAKLES' house. Seated at the altar of ZEUS the RESCUER, AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, and her THREE SONS by HERAKLES.

AMPHITRYON Say the name Amphitryon of Argos
And the whole world snaps to. I'm the very man—
That same Amphitryon who shared his wife with Zeus.
You'll recognize my father, Alkaïos,
And Perseus, my grandfather—another household name.
And as for my son, can there be anyone
Alive who hasn't heard of Herakles?
I've settled here in Thebes.

Thebes, where dragonteeth
Were broadcast and sprouted full-grown fighters
Berserk to kill each other.

Ares kept a few back
From the slaughter and they put down roots—their
children's

Children grew up here in this city Kadmos
Built from the ground up. And from them
Sprung Kreon, the son of Menoikeus—
Kreon, who *was* our king;

and the father

10

Of Megara here . . .

Once the whole city
Turned out to celebrate her wedding,
Singing and playing pipes as Herakles
Led her through the streets—home to his father's house.
But my son left home. Left me and Megara
And all his in-laws here in Thebes. He wanted
To take back dear old Argos, a city so huge
You'd think the Cyclopes planned it—

20

those high-built walls
Shadowed me when I had to flee to Thebes
For striking down Elektryon. Well—for me,
To brighten an exile's grief, and take back
Home ground, he had to make a deal.
He struck a tough bargain with Eurystheus:
Tame the old powers, make the whole world safe—
And Eurystheus would let him and me go home.

Who knows 30

If Hera's hatred or Necessity itself
Made him shake hands on such a price?
He pushed through to the end—now, one labor's left:
To force his way through the jaws of Tainaron
And bring back from the underworld
Its three-headed watchdog.

But Hades

Swallowed him like light.

He still hasn't come back . . .

There's an old story among the Thebans:
Old King Lykos, who was married to our Queen Dirke,
Once held power here. This was before Zethus
And Amphion controlled the city's seven gates.
Twins sired by Zeus, they were nicknamed the white
colts.

40

But Lykos' son, who was named after his father
—Kadmos didn't breed him; he came from Euboea—
Ambushed the city. Civil war had broken out.
But I'll cut the story short: Lykos killed Kreon.
And killing made Lykos boss.

Now our blood ties

To Kreon have become a noose.

Because my son is
Down in the dark depths of the earth, Lykos—

That hero, new strongman of Thebes—plans to murder

us:

50

Herakles' little boys. His father. His wife—
Murder on top of murder, like using
Fire to put out fire: Me, I'm just a blathering
Old nuisance. I scarcely count. But these boys—
If they grow to men, they'll pay back blood with blood.

When Herakles went down to the blackness
Underground, he left me behind—to play nursemaid
To these boys. Now all I can do is kneel
With their mother before this altar—
And pray to Zeus the Rescuer . . . this altar,
A reminder of what my son's spear can do;
That he set up to celebrate his great victory
Over the Minyans.

60

But us, we're worse than beggars—
No food; nothing to drink; no clothes. We're camped
Out here on the bare hard ground. Locked out
Of our own house. Destitute. Doomed.

And as for friends—

Well, most won't lift a finger. And those that will
Have no power. When bad luck catches up to you,
You learn that friendship won't stand up to misfortune.
No matter how two-faced my worst friends' smiles,
I wouldn't wish on them this trial of friendship.

70

MEGARA So, old man—remember when you commanded
Our Theban spearmen? You razed the city
Of the Taphians. But the gods work out our fates
In ways too crooked and devious for human eyes.
My father was acclaimed great. His greatness
Was my luck—I wasn't brought up wanting.
My father was rich and had the power
To protect us from his rivals' spears;
But power and wealth make for greed;

and spear

80

Lifted against spear is the way to power.

My father

Had us children as a further blessing—
And as for me—my luck, and his will, granted me

Your Herakles.

But now that's over. Dead. Flown.
 And you and I, old man—we're done for;
 And along with us, these three chicks of ours,
 Huddling and nestling under their mother's wing.
 They can't help themselves, they keep asking
 After him: "Mother, where's our father gone?
 What's he doing? When will he come home?"
 They don't understand, they're just too young . . .
 The way lost children stumble blind at night,
 They call out, "Father? Father?"

90

I keep
 Putting them off. Distracting them with chatter.
 But when they'd hear the door latch creak, they'd all
 scramble up
 And run to hug their father's knees.

So, old man—
 What are our chances? I'm counting on you
 To rescue us. The borders are sealed tight,
 Guards everywhere, patrols bottling up
 Every road. Our friends have let us down.
 If you've got a plan, let's hear it.

100

We all know
 What will happen if we keep on standing here.

AMPHITRYON My girl, I don't know what to say. Our troubles
 Call for hard thought, not casual chatter.
 When you're weak, what can you do but wait?

MEGARA Wait for something worse? Do you love your life that
 much?

AMPHITRYON I'm still alive, aren't I? Even that gives me hope.

MEGARA I love being alive too. But it's hopeless to hope for what
 can't be.

AMPHITRYON By playing for time, hard times can be cured.

MEGARA The time spent waiting is worse than being tortured.

110

AMPHITRYON Look. The wind can change course. The storm
 Blows over, and our troubles melt like mist.

Trust to Herakles. He still may come
 To rescue us—me, his old father, you, his wife.
 Try to stay calm. The tears welling up
 In your boys' eyes, brush them away;
 Tell them a story that will make their crying stop,
 No matter how much a lie the story seems to you.
 The wind blowing against us, that makes us
 Desperate now, won't always be this strong—
 It'll blow itself out. Good luck too
 Blows hot and cold. Everything changes;
 Things look as if they'll never end and then—
 Before we know it—they too are swept away.
 We have to keep on. That's what courage is.
 Only if we lose heart can they call us cowards.

120

Enter CHORUS.

CHORUS To this high-roofed house
 We come like ghosts,
 Apparitions leaning on our staffs,
 Our voices ghost-voices
 Whispering round an old man's bed.
 The dying swan whose song is sad
 Can't match ours for misery.
 What good is our good will
 When things go from bad to worse?
 You boys have lost your father.
 Old man, you've lost your son.
 And you, unhappy wife,
 Our words can't touch your grief:
 Your man is locked away
 Down in the house of death.

130

140

Keep moving. Heavy step
 By step lift your tired feet
 The way a horse pulls the weight
 Of a chariot up a rocky slope.
 If anyone needs your help,
 Give him a steadying hand
 The way when we were younger,
 Fighting with our spears,

We drove off the enemy
For the glory of our country.

150

Look at those boys' eyes
Gleaming like their father's:
Fierce. Stony. A stare
That hardens one to stone.
Yes. And they've inherited
Their father's rotten luck.
Along with his good looks.

Greece, what defenders you lose
If you lose these boys!

160

Look—it's the headman, Lykos,
Strutting toward the house.

Enter LYKOS, with FOLLOWERS.

LYKOS You, who claim you're Herakles' father,
And you, his wife—allow me a few questions,
Won't you? I thought you might. Let's face it:
I'm in charge here. I'll ask whatever I want.

Still nursing your hopes? A snap of my fingers—
And you're done.

Or are you cracked
Enough to think that these boys' father,
Who's dead—will suddenly show his face?
Aren't you ashamed of your stupid blubbering?
And all because you're about to die . . .

170

you,
Who bragged all over Greece about pimping
Your wife to Zeus—and you, who boasted
That your husband was a hero. What's so glorious
About killing some slimy marsh snake?

Or that Nemean Lion—
He claimed he strangled it with his bare hands . . .
But everybody knows he trapped it in a net.
Your case has more holes than a net,
If that's all the evidence you've got.

He's a nobody—

180

He made his reputation by slaughtering
 Dumb beasts. Let's see him with a shield
 On that brawny left arm, parrying a spearthrust.
 But he uses a bow—handy for retreat.
 A bow's for cowards. A man with real guts
 Stands his ground, face to face, when a spear
 Comes hurtling through the ranks.

So—killing
 His sons isn't cruelty, but shrewd policy.
 We all know who killed Kreon. We all know
 Who took away his throne. I'm not about
 To let these cubs grow up and bare their fangs.

190

AMPHITRYON Zeus, Herakles is your son, too. Use your power
 To defend him!

My part's to speak out
 Against such stinking lies—
 with the Gods
 As my witnesses, Son, I'll make him eat his words;
 I'll show him up for the liar that he is:

You're unspeakable, to call my son coward!
 But maybe Zeus' thunderbolts don't impress you?
 Or Zeus' chariot that my son drove into battle
 When the gods fought against those giants,
 The monstrous children of the earth?

200

Stuck between their ribs,
 The arrows of Herakles taught that gang a thing or two.
 And afterwards, my son took his place among
 The other gods to sing the victory song!
 Or go to Pholoe, you dirty tyrant,
 And ask the Centaurs—those four-legged savages—
 Who they think is the bravest man on earth:
 Herakles. My son. That's how they'll answer.

Herakles,
 Whose courage you talk down—

but since you think
 He's such a phony, why don't you go back
 To your hometown, Dirphys in Euboea—
 And ask what your own people think of you?
 Who calls you brave—let alone a hero?

210

There's no place in all Euboea
That could talk up one brave deed you've done.

And as for sneering at that thinking-man's invention,
The bow—

let me put you straight.

Your infantryman

Is a slave, hauling around his spear and shield.

He's at the mercy of his fellow soldiers

In the ranks. If the man next to him

220

Holds back or breaks rank because he's scared,

He's dead—

and because someone else turned coward.

And if your spear shaft breaks—your sole weapon

Against death—you might as well be standing naked.

But let's say you've got a bow—and you're a good shot.

First, you can shoot arrows all day, as many arrows

As you want: you can *always* defend yourself.

And second—you can fight at long range.

Your enemy

Can't spot you. While their taking heavy

Casualties, the wounds from your arrows

230

Are all the enemy can see. And you—you're snug

As a baby. They can't strike back.

In war,

That's the best strategy. To train your firepower

On whoever's in range while you keep

Your own head down.

So that's that. I've put

The record straight. For every claim you made,

The truth is really just the opposite.

And these boys—why murder them? What have
They done to you?

Of course, you're smart in one thing:

Since you're a coward, you fear a real man's children.

240

But that *we* should have to die to prove your cowardice—

That's the worst. Our swords would be at your throat—

We, who are your betters—

if Zeus' mind were just.

But if power over Thebes is your game,

Send us into exile. You leave us unharmed,
 No one will harm you. Just like that—
 God can turn the wind against you.

And you, city of Kadmos! Don't think you'll get off
 Without my curses.

Is this how you show gratitude
 To Herakles and his sons? Herakles, who
 Single-handedly routed the whole Minyan army,
 And made you Thebans free to hold up your heads again?
 In fact, all Greece ought to be ashamed:
 I can't keep quiet!

250

Greece should be on the march,
 Campaigning with all she's got to protect these boys!
 She owes it to Herakles! His labors cleared the earth and
 seas

Of monsters: For us, he made things safe.
 But look at them, boys—these Thebans don't lift a finger.
 Nor do the other Greeks.

And me, what can I do?
 I'm useless as the rattling of my tongue.
 I'm winded. Utterly spent. Just look at me,
 I'm trembling!

260

If only I were young and strong again,
 My spear would bloody those blond curls of his.
 I'd drive the coward beyond the bounds of Atlas—
 Past land's end—trying to dodge my spear!

CHORUS Whether his words come easily or not
 An honest man always can find inside
 Himself a reservoir of authentic speech.

LYKOS Go on, keep babbling! Pile up and up your tower
 Of words.

But to pay you back, I'll do more than talk.
 You there, go to Helikon—and you, to Parnassos.
 Tell the crews there to cut down a stand of oak
 And bring the logs here.

270

To keep our friends
 Cozy and warm, we'll pile wood around the altar.
 And once the flames get roaring, we'll have

A roast—

the whole lot of them—

that should teach you

The dead have no power here. From now on,

I'm the one who calls the shots.

(*To Chorus.*) You

burned-out old fools!

For taking their part, you'll weep for more

Than Herakles' sons.

I'll give you something real

280

To cry about: Your own houses torn down

Around your ears. That should teach you

Who's in charge here. And who's a slave.

CHORUS Ares tore the teeth from the dragon's jaws
And planted them like seeds. We sprouted up,
Earth's sons, Thebans who don't scrape or bow
To murderers like you.

These staffs we lean on

Make good clubs. You control the young men,

But watch out! You're a stranger here—

I'll hand you your head. You can't push us around.

290

I've worked myself to the bone. But all I've worked for

Won't go to you—you, an outsider!

Go back where

You came from. Do your dirty work there.

As long as I'm alive, you won't harm a hair

On these boys' heads. Herakles left his sons—

But he hasn't gone so far under the earth

That we forget what we owe him.

He saved

Our country.

You destroyed it. Took over.

Cheated him of the honor that he's due.

Call me an agitator,

but friendship commands

300

That I help Herakles—now, when he needs it most.

If only my right hand was strong enough

To grip my spear again.

But I'm spent.

If I were younger, you wouldn't get away

With calling me slave!

Instead of your filthy pleasures,
We'd live honorably here in Thebes.
But our city was torn apart by civil war.
Thebes went mad and took bad counsel.
Otherwise, you'd never have come to power.

MEGARA Thank you for standing up for us. Old friends
Are the truest friends. But be careful your anger
Doesn't put you in danger too.

310

Amphitryon,
For what it's worth, hear me out.

I love these boys—
How could I not? My labors gave them breath
And nurture.

I'm afraid of dying. Of death.
But it's hopeless to fight against our fate.
We have to face the fact: We die.

But to be burned
Alive—the butt of our enemy's jokes:
To me, that's worse than death.
We have a code to live up to, our family honor
Must be preserved. You made your name
As a great soldier. It's unthinkable
For you to die a coward's death.

320

And no one
Needs to remind me that these boys' father
Wouldn't lift a finger to save his sons
If it meant disgracing our family name.
I'm like him in that:

If your heart is good
And true, when you see your sons disgraced,
It breaks you.

So think about it—
What are you pinning your hopes on?
Do you really believe that your son will return
From the earth's depths?

330

Who, of all the dead,
Has ever come home from Hades?
Or do you imagine all our talk will persuade

Lykos to feel sorry for us?

Maybe

If your enemy's a man of conscience
And honor, you can touch his heart
And he'll show you mercy.

But this man

Is a savage.

It even occurred to me,
What if we begged to have these children
Sent into exile? But isn't that worse?
To save their lives, only to make them
Beggars?

340

And when it comes to exiles,
You know the old saying: "Your host's smile
Turns to a frown in a single day."
We have to face up to death—it's coming anyway.
Old friend, I challenge you: Face it with us.
I know how brave you are at heart.
When the gods trap you in their schemes,
To fight against them shows spirit—
But it's hopeless.

350

Fate itself nets us in.

What must happen happens. We can't escape.

CHORUS If only I had my old fighting strength back,
I'd shove his threats back down his throat.
But I'm old. Done in. Good for nothing.

Amphitryon,

It's up to you to fight clear of this trap.

AMPHITRYON I'm no coward. It's not longing for life
That keeps me from facing death.

But these boys—

They're the sons of my son.

I want

To save them. But what I want can't be.

360

Go ahead. Cut my throat. Stab me.
Or throw me off a cliff.

But do us one favor:

Murder us before you murder these boys.

Spare us the sight of that—
their last breath
 Gasping, "Mama!" "Grandpa!"
For the rest,
 Since you're so eager, go ahead. No one
 Gets off death. We have to die.

MEGARA Grant me a last wish too—I'm begging you.
One favor from you will oblige us both.
Let me dress up my children for their deaths.
Unlock the door to our house.

Give these boys
At least this much of their inheritance.

LYKOS I can give that much. Men, unlock the doors.
Go on. Take what you need. I don't begrudge you
Funeral robes. And when you're finished dressing,
I'll be back—

and give you away
to the world below.

Exit LYKOS, with FOLLOWERS.

MEGARA Boys, let's go in. Follow your poor mother
Into your father's house. Everything
He had has been taken away from him.
But no one can take away from us his name.

Exit MEGARA and CHILDREN into HERAKLES' house.

AMPHITRYON So; Zeus. You slip into my bed, you take
What you want—

and you pay me back like this?
You were one of us . . . I thought of you as my friend—
You and I the father of Herakles!

But Zeus,
Now, all that means nothing. And I'm nothing
But a weak old man.

But I'm better than you—
Who call yourself a god. I have my principles,
I haven't betrayed the sons of Herakles. But you—
you've

Abandoned us, your own people, You don't
 Lift a hand to help. Either you're blind
 To the troubles of human beings.
 Or you're heart's hard. Without justice.

390

Exit AMPHITRYON into house.

CHORUS When victory's all we know,
 Our songs are full of joy.
 But then they turn to grief:
 We know hatred.
 Strife. Death.
 And both our joy and grief
 Blend in Apollo's notes
 So pure they break our hearts . . .
 With his golden pick he plucks
 Taut strings that quaver
 Deep in the inner ear
 Hearing beneath that sound
 The deads' toneless music
 Welling from underground.

400

I've learned to sing in praise
 Of my friend lost
 In darkness. My song
 A wreath for his labors—
 For everything he suffered.

410

A life lived in all our faculties
 Is happiness; and the glory
 Of the dead. Like Herakles, whether
 We're children of gods or men,
 Each moment takes our measure:
 We live the best way we can.

First, he killed the lion prowling
 In Zeus' wood. He cloaked
 Himself in its tough hide,
 Used its jaws as a hood.
 Golden hair, tawny mane,
 Who could tell beast from man?

420

Next he drew his bow,
 Arrow after arrow killing
 A centaur in its mountain pasture.
 They trampled down furrows
 Until crops wouldn't grow,
 Tore up pines and brandished
 Them like spears, or set 430
 The pitch on fire: Whole towns
 Torched, driven into hiding!
 Peneios, the river god, who
 Peered up from his swirling waters,
 Mount Pelion's valleys
 And Homole's grassy slopes
 Witnessed the devastation:
 Backs and rumps of horses,
 Sharp hooves, swift runners,
 Appetites of wild creatures— 440
 Faces just like ours.
 Look: They were monsters,
 Half animal, half human,
 Rampaging over
 Thessaly, instinct
 At war with reason.
 So Herakles took aim:
 His bow shot straight.

He had to hunt down
 The stag with golden horns 450
 And dappled hide that drove
 The farmers from their fields
 And battered the countryside,
 Killer on impulse. Beast mind.
 High on the mountain shrine
 Its blood stained his hand
 When he slit its throat
 In sacrifice to Artemis, cruel
 Goddess of the hunt.

Unbridled in the barn 460
 Diomedes's mares neighed for more
 Than oats. Their teeth snapped
 And tore, devouring

Their master's guests.
Herakles had his work cut out
To curb such appetites.
To the bit and chariot
He broke their spirits,
Teeth champing iron
Instead of human guts.

470

Like a man obsessed
He kept on going, under orders
From Mycenae's king
Who set him labor
After labor. So Herakles
Pushed past all common
Human limit, crossing
Silver-flowing Hebros
Whirlpooling toward the sea.
He reached the tall
Headland near a river
Called Anauros where
Springs from underground
Lured travelers to rest:
Pure water. Pure pleasure.
But the place hid a monster:
Kyknos, who loved slaughter,
And beheaded his own guests.
Herakles took aim:
The springs boiled and gushed.

480

490

Then he traveled to where
The horses of the Sun,
Panting, lathered, end
Their daylong run,
Sky turning bloody when
Light sinks in the West.
There in the garden
Of Singing Maidens
Pure as their song,
He plucked the golden apples
From the flashing bough.
But the apples cost blood.
He had to shoot the coiling

500

Dragon whose scales, flaming red,
Smouldered round the tree.

In hidden coves and cays
He hunted pirates down
And made the open sea safe
For sailors at their oars.

He came to Atlas' mansion,
And stretching out his arms, balanced
Heaven on his back: His strength
Was more than human to bear
Up under the weight
Of the gods' immaculate
Halls glittering with starlight.

510

He recruited troops
From every town in Greece
And crossed the black sea's
Storming waves, mind fraught
As the great rivers that
Pour into a delta marsh
Teeming with birds and fish.
But the abundance in his head
Was his own violence
Trained on the Amazons
Fierce as the god of war,
Ready to fight fire with fire.
Their cavalry went down
Before Herakles' club, blood
Staining their shining robes.
The Greeks stripped their corpses
Knocked sprawling in the dirt—
And back in Mycenae,
As if it were the pelt
Of a wild beast, Herakles
Hung up for all to see
The dead queen's golden belt.

520

530

He faced down Lerna's hydra
Barking and howling,
Its murderous teeth snapping

540

In all its thousand heads
 That he chopped off and seared
 To ash. And on the tips
 Of his arrows he smeared
 Her slobber so lethal
 He brought down Geryon,
 The triple-bodied herdsman,
 With a single shaft.

He ran whatever course
 Fate set him—and he won.
 But the crown of all his labors
 Is common to everyone:
 The end of endeavor,
 Of all we hold most dear.
 He sailed into the harbor
 Of sighs and tears, of airless
 Hades where our sails go slack.
 Hero, slave, everyone
 But the gods disembark.
 And no one crosses back.

550

560

His house is ruined.
 He's been abandoned
 By his friends. His children
 Are queued up for Charon's boat
 That ferries us one way.
 Don't talk to me of gods;
 Or Justice; Wrong or Right.
 Only your strong hands,
 Herakles, can set
 Things straight. You alone
 Can rescue them. But you're gone.

570

When I was young and strong
 I knew what a spear was for!
 All of us when we were young
 And fighting in the ranks
 Would have stood by these children.
 But I'm useless. Broken down.
 The old days' glory is done—

And I'm done with them.
 Only those who are young
 And strong can be truly happy.

580

Enter MEGARA, AMPHITRYON, and the THREE BOYS.

There they are, dressed in funeral robes,
 The sons of Herakles who once dazzled
 The whole world with his strength.

See his wife

Dragging her boys by the hand,
 Balking like colts against their traces.
 And here comes Herakles' poor
 Father, as broken down as we are.
 It's true that as we get older
 Our spirits get heavier from the weight
 Of all we suffer: My eyes are blurry.
 I can't keep blinking these tears away.

590

MEGARA Where's the priest and his knife? We're ready
 To be butchered—though the butcher calls it sacrifice.
 Here the victims are—now lead us off to Hades.
 We make a mismatched team under one yoke:
 Old and young, children and their mother—
 All pulling together toward our deaths.

I gave you boys life, nursed you, reared you.
 And for what? So that those who hate us
 Can humiliate us for their pleasure
 Before they cut us down?

600

Now I'm looking

At your faces for the last time . . .

I had high hopes

For you—

but those are done. Hopes I built
 On your father's promises.

Your father.

Who's now dead . . .

He planned to give you
 Argos and all her rich farmland. Eurystheus' palace

And his power were to be yours. Remember
 How your father draped the lion skin
 He wore as armor over your shoulders?

610

And you were to rule Thebes and all her chariots—
 The plains round the city that my father
 Passed on to me were your inheritance:

You behaved

Like your father's son when you asked for Thebes
 The way other children ask for toys:
 And he gave it to you. Remember the huge
 Carved club he used to carry? He'd put it
 In your right hand and pretend that it was yours.

And he promised you Oechalia
 That he took with his well-aimed arrows.

620

Your father's care for you boys was as great
 As his strength: For three sons, he intended
 To raise up three kingdoms.

And I was to choose

For each of you a wife from Athens, Thebes or Sparta—
 To moor you the way a ship's stern hawsers do
 So you'd ride out all storms safe and happy.
 But the winds have shifted round on us:
 Fortune's given you your own deaths for brides.
 And my tears have become the lustral water
 For the ritual bath . . .

630

more pain to bear.

Your old grandfather gives the marriage feast
 For Hades—which makes death your bitter in-law.
 If I hug you first,

which should I hug last?

Do I kiss this one?

Or hold you close?

You've seen how a bee goes flower to flower
 And gathers nectar for the hive—

if only I could gather

All the sorrow that we suffer
 And condense it into a single drop
 That I could weep for us all . . .

Herakles,

640

Love, if any words from here
 Ever make their way below, listen to me now:
 Your father and your boys are about to die—
 And I'm to die too. All Greece once called me
 Blessed because of you.

So help us. Come.
 Even if it's just your shadow.

Or come
 As a dream. That's all you need to do—
 These men are such cowards—to stop them
 From slaughtering your sons.

AMPHITRYON

My girl, keep praying
 To the gods below while I raise up my hands
 To the sky:

650

Zeus, help these children now!
 If you intend to help at all. One moment more—
 And it will be over.

But I'm wasting my breath.
 I've prayed and prayed—
 and nothing happens.
 We can't avoid death. We have to die.
 And as for life, old friends, what does it amount to?
 The best we can hope for is to fend off pain
 Between dawn and dark.

Time could care less
 About our hopes. It rushes off on its
 Own business—and it's gone.

Just look at me,
 The prime example: Who didn't sing
 My praises or call me famous or applaud me
 For accomplishing great things?

660

Wealth. Reputation—
 The wind blows them away just like a feather:
 All you've worked for is wrecked in a single day.
 The wind keeps shifting. Nobody's secure . . .
 We were all boys together, grew up with one another.
 So take a long, last look at your old friend.

HERAKLES *appears in the wings.*

MEGARA It can't be. Who could believe it? Father,
Is that Herakles? My own dear husband?

670

AMPHITRYON My girl, I can't say. I'm speechless.

MEGARA *It is Herakles. They told us he'd gone down
Forever under the earth—*

unless he's come back

As a dream flickering in the sun.

But I'm not dreaming—

or seeing things

My aching mind makes more real than day:

It's Herakles, your son!

Boys, run to him!

Hold tight to his coat. Never let him loose!

Hurry now! He's come to rescue us:

He'll be more help to us than Zeus!

680

HERAKLES *moves on stage.*

HERAKLES There it is—

My own roof—and the gate before my house!

Just sunlight on my face and hands

Gives me such pleasure—

I made it back home. Alive.

Bless these old walls!

There my boys are—

Before the gate.

What?

What's all this?

They look to be dressed—for their own funerals.

Heads crowned with wreaths.

And my wife—

Out of doors?—surrounded by that crowd of men!

And there's my father—

in tears!

Tell me what's happened here?

690

What's come over this house?

MEGARA My love, my husband . . .

AMPHITRYON My boy, welcome as sunlight to these old eyes!

MEGARA You're alive—and now you've come—in time to rescue
us!

HERAKLES Will someone tell me what's happened here?
Father? What is all this?

MEGARA Murder, that's what.
They want to murder us!
Forgive me, old man,
For speaking out before you. A woman
Feels her troubles more readily than a man.
They were about to kill my boys. And me.

HERAKLES Great God Apollo! What will you tell me next? 700

MEGARA My brothers and my old father—they're all dead!

HERAKLES How? What happened? Or was it someone's spear?

MEGARA Lykos killed them. He's the power now in Thebes.

HERAKLES Was it a fair fight, spear against spear? Or the waste of
civil war?

MEGARA Civil war. He lords it over us, the upstart, and our seven
gates.

HERAKLES But what frightened you and the old man so?

MEGARA He planned to murder us: Me, your father, and your
boys.

HERAKLES Kill them? What made him fear my orphaned sons?

MEGARA That one day they'd revenge my father's death.

HERAKLES Why are my children dressed up like the dead? 710

MEGARA We put on funeral robes . . . to get ready for our own
deaths.

HERAKLES He was about to murder you? That breaks me!

MEGARA Our friends abandoned us. We were told that you were
dead.

HERAKLES But why did you lose heart that I'd come back?

MEGARA Eurystheus' heralds kept telling us you were dead.

HERAKLES Why did you leave our home? Locked out of our own
gates?

MEGARA He forced us. Dragged your father out of his bed.

HERAKLES No respect for age? Where's his sense of shame?

MEGARA Lykos feel shame? The only goddess he knows is force.

HERAKLES My friends while I was gone—were they so scarce? 720

MEGARA Friends? If your luck goes bad, you have no friends.

HERAKLES All I suffered in the Minyan wars, they shrug that off?

MEGARA I'll say it again: bad fortune has no friends.

HERAKLES Those wreaths of death—

tear them off your heads!

Look up into the sunlight—look!

After death's

Darkness, feel how the sun comes back to warm us!

My work's cut out. Now let me go about it.

With this hand I'll tear down around his ears

The pillars of this upstart tyrant's house.

Then chop off

His perverted head and throw it to the dogs

730

To gnaw.

This victorious club

Will make the rounds of Thebes and pay its respects

To the ones who turned traitors—

despite all I suffered

For them!

Or I'll fill the air with arrows

Raining like a cloudburst round their heads
 Until Ismenos overflows with corpses
 And Dirke's pure waters boil with blood.

A man's first obligation is to defend
 His wife and children, his old father.
 My labors and all I suffered—

the madness of it!

740

I let down those whom I ought to die for—
 After all, they were about to die for me.
 Killing lions and hydras for Eurystheus
 And not toiling for my own sons' threatened
 Lives—

that's honor and glory for you!

Had *that* been the outcome of all my labors,
 Who now would call me Herakles the Conqueror?

CHORUS It's only right that a man should stand up for his sons,
 His old father, and his wife who's his faithful mate.

AMPHITRYON Son, it's always been your way to love your friends
 And hate your enemies. But don't move too fast.

750

HERAKLES Am I rushing into something, Father?

AMPHITRYON Lykos and his gang—a bunch of lazy,
 Big-spending climbers, who went bankrupt
 While trying to pass themselves off as wealthy—
 Raised the riots that brought Thebes down:
 They wanted to rob their neighbors
 And fill their pockets.

You were seen

Entering the city, so don't be caught offguard:
 Your enemies will come swarming soon enough.

760

HERAKLES I could care less if the whole city saw me!
 But a bird settled on an ill-omened perch—
 I knew right then there was trouble,
 So I slipped undetected into Thebes.

AMPHITRYON Well done. Now go in and greet your household gods—
 Let your fathers' house welcome you face to face.

Soon Lykos will arrive to haul us off
 To slaughter—your wife, your sons, and me.
 If you wait inside, he'll fall into your hands—
 And no risks.

Don't stir up things in Thebes
 Until you set things straight in your own house.

770

HERAKLES I'll do as you say—I'll go inside.
 Just feel that warmth. After all I went through
 In the earth's sunless depths, I won't forget
 To thank the gods who protect our home.

AMPHITRYON Son, I'm eager to hear—did you really go down to
 Hades?

HERAKLES Yes: I dragged up to the light his three-headed watchdog.

AMPHITRYON Did you fight? Or was he a gift from the goddess?

HERAKLES I had to fight. The Mysteries I witnessed gave me
 strength.

AMPHITRYON Where's the monster now? At Eurystheus' house?

780

HERAKLES At Hermione. In the earth goddess's sacred grove.

AMPHITRYON Does Eurystheus know you've returned from the earth's
 depths?

HERAKLES No. I came here first to see how things stood.

AMPHITRYON What kept you such a long time underground?

HERAKLES I stayed to rescue Theseus from Hades.

AMPHITRYON Where's he now? Returned to his homeland?

HERAKLES In Athens, glad to have escaped the underworld.

Boys, let's go in. Go with your father
 Into our house. You're happier, aren't you,
 Going in than when you were coming out.

790

Don't be frightened any longer. Dry your tears.
 And you, my wife, take heart—stop trembling.
 You can stop clutching my coat—

I don't have wings;

I'm not going to run from those I love.

Well!

They won't let me loose—

they cling

To my coat tighter. How close you came

To the razor's edge.

Here, take my hands—

I'll be the ship that tows the smaller boats

Into harbor.

How could I not want

To take care of these boys? Human beings

800

Are alike in this:

Whether we're powerful

Or not, whether our luck is good or bad,

We love our children—

some of us are rich,

Some poor—

but all of us love our children.

Exit HERAKLES, AMPHITRYON, MEGARA, and the BOYS.

CHORUS Old age weighs me

Down worse than Etna's

Stones. It's drawn like a curtain

Between me and the sun.

Gold bars that fill palaces,

An Eastern king's wealth,

810

Won't buy me back my youth.

What I long for most—

To come again full flower

In body, heart and soul—

All the spoils of power

And privilege can't restore.

This side of the grave,

Whether we lock our gate

Or sleep out in the street,

Youth is what we crave.

820

I hate old age, its feet

That stink of death creeping
 Closer every hour.
 Whirl it off like trash
 Spinning in the storm.
 Let the waves capsize it,
 Drown it in the deep.
 Banish it from the city.
 Keep it far from my home.

'The gods' ways aren't our ways: 830
 Who knows what they think
 Of what we think is wise?
 But if they thought as
 We do, they'd grant a second
 Youth to a life of virtue.
 Having run their race
 To death, the good would catch
 Their breath and double
 Back to sunlight while
 The wicked and mean 840
 Live out their single span.
 We could tell good from bad
 As clearly as when a cloud
 Shifts to reveal the stars
 To sharp-eyed sailors.
 But the gods' ways aren't ours:
 Between good and bad action,
 They don't draw a clear line.
 And time, as the years roll on,
 Does not lay things bare 850
 Or blind us with the truth.
 A bad man rakes it in
 While a good man stays poor.
 Age walks on their faces.
 Wealth outlives them both.

Song is what I live for.
 Song that joins together
 The Graces and the Muses,
 Each interwoven gesture
 The currents of a river. 860
 To me, music is water

I couldn't live without.
 Even though I'm old
 And my muse is Memory,
 What life is left to me
 I'll use to sing her praise—
 She taught me to weave
 A song for Herakles
 To crown his victor's brow.
 As long as Bakkhos keeps on
 Splashing out wine
 And my hands stay strong
 To pluck the lyre's strings
 Or play the shrilling pipe,
 I'll keep on with my song:
 The Muses who set me dancing
 Still guide my crippled feet.

870

The girls of Delos sing
 Their victory song
 At the temple gate
 Of bright-voiced Apollo,
 Son of Leto.
 They dance in a circle,
 White feet so beautiful
 That an old graybeard like me
 Feels rising in his throat,
 Here before your gate,
 A song the dying swan
 Might sing—but still a song
 Of praise for the son
 Of Zeus: Though his birth
 Was divine, his deeds
 Surpass that high beginning:
 As he strove to rid the earth
 Of monsters, wild beasts,
 Of shapes that glide and prowl
 When the house goes still,
 Through fear and struggle
 He became our double—
 His labors made him
 Human, open to it all;
 But he also had to kill,

880

890

900

Rage like a wild animal.
 That we mortals have the chance
 To lead a tranquil life
 We owe to his violence.

Enter LYKOS, with FOLLOWERS. Reenter AMPHITRYON.

LYKOS So Amphitryon—you aren't a moment
 Too soon. You took your own sweet time
 In getting dressed for death.

Go on:

Tell the wife and sons of Herakles
 To come here too—and without any fuss—
 That's the deal we struck when you agreed to die.

910

AMPHITRYON You drive me hard in my misery.
 My son is dead—*isn't that grief enough?*
 You're the power here; we all bow to you.
 Why press us so hard? You command us
 To die:

Now.

And so we will die:
 What you order us to do, we must obey.

LYKOS Where's Megara—and those cubs of Alkmene's dead son?

AMPHITRYON As near as I can make out—I suppose—

920

LYKOS What do you mean, you "suppose"? Tell me what you
know.

AMPHITRYON She's kneeling before the hearth-goddess's altar to pray—

LYKOS For what? Praying won't save her life . . .

AMPHITRYON A hopeless prayer. For her dead husband to return.

LYKOS He's not here now. And he'll never come.

AMPHITRYON Never . . . unless some god raises him from the dead.

LYKOS Go inside the house and bring her out.

AMPHITRYON That would make me an accomplice to her murder.

LYKOS Well, well . . . such scruples!

But no fears hold me back
From dragging out this mother and her sons.
Guards, follow me in.

930

The pleasure
Of ending this "labor" will be all mine.

Exit LYKOS and FOLLOWERS.

AMPHITRYON Well, go ahead—when fate commands, you too obey.
Someone else will bring your labor to an end.
What you did was evil—expect evil in return.
Justice, my friends, this is justice—

a net thrown
Over his head, swords hidden in the mesh . . .
There he goes, the coward—

itching to murder us
While he's the one being led to slaughter.
I'll go in and watch him bleed.

Nothing could be sweeter.
He'll pay the just price—blood for blood.

940

Exit AMPHITRYON.

CHORUS The gods demand reprisal: Evil
Turns back on the man who commits evil.
The river of Lykos' life flows backwards
To death.

You'll pay with your own blood
For all the blood you shed.

For lording it
Over your betters, your time comes to suffer.
Each step brings you closer to the fate
You planned for others.

I'd lost all hope
That he'd return—my eyes smart with tears,
I'm so glad to see our king.

950

Come on, old friends,
Let's look inside the house—

I want to see
If it all happens the way we'd hoped.

LYKOS (from inside Herakles' house) Help! Help!

CHORUS From inside the house the first note sounds sweet.
Another note, another— and the tune's soon over.

LYKOS (as before) Country of Kadmos! They've laid an
ambush!
They're murdering me!

CHORUS Yes, blood for blood,
Murder for murder. For what you owe,
You're paying the full price.

Who was the liar
Who claimed the gods have no power? 960
It had to be a human being. Only flesh and blood
Could spread such a senseless story.
A lawless man. A scoffer.

Old friends,
Our enemy—and all his evil—is wiped away.
The house has gone silent. Joy makes me want to dance.
Our friends won out! Just as I'd hoped!

After grief and pain, when
Good fortune starts to shine,
Every rut in every street
Brimms over with light. 970
The dancers' flashing feet
Make us join their dancing
And tears that flowed down
Inspire in us new songs.
Take to the streets, celebrate
This change of fortune!
Dancing, singing, feasting—
The whole town seems divine!
The upstart eats dirt—
And power flashes 980
From the brow
Of our rightful king
Who set sail over Acheron.
I'd given up all hope
That he'd return

From death's chill harbor.
But hope reversed despair.

The gods watch over
The races that we run,
The unjust and the just 990
In breakneck competition—
Gold and Good Fortune,
Power and Lawlessness
Are the horses we lash
Into a lather to pull
Our chariot faster
Than Law gaining on us hard,
Coming up on the outside.
Yoked to his ambitions,
What driver looks ahead 1000
To the homeward stretch?
Whipped on by his own will,
He hurtles forward
In the black chariot
Of worldly success:
Spoke and axle snap—
He's thrown head over heels
Into drifting dust.

River Ismenos, put on
Your whirlpooling crowns! 1010
All the gleaming streets
Flowing out like rivers
To our city's seven gates
Join in the dancing
Of Dirke's rippling flow
And of Asopos' daughters
Whose heads toss like waves
Above their father's waters
Running cool, bright fingers
Through their streaming hair. 1020
Join in the victory song
Of our own Herakles!
Rocky woods of Delphi,
Muses on Mount Helikon,
Make your voices echo off

These walls of stone
 Where our ancestors sown
 From dragon teeth sprang up
 Armored in bronze and hand on
 Our country to their children's
 Children whose eyes burn
 With the saving light of dawn.

1030

Think of the bed that a god
 And a human being shared,
 The divine and mortal
 Both longing to embrace
 The same bride, Alkmene,
 Granddaughter of Perseus.
 I doubted at first that Zeus
 Took part—but the years
 Don't lie: They shine down,
 Zeus, on Herakles your son,
 And reveal his strength
 To be superhuman.
 In Pluto's prison
 He broke the chains of death
 And came back to the sun
 From the depths underground.
 Power that settles
 On the chosen man
 Proves that Herakles
 Is worthier than
 That low-class climber.
 Put a sword in his hand,
 Make him stand and fight—
 And you'll find out fast
 Whether the gods still favor
 A cause they think is just.

1040

1050

IRIS and MADNESS appear above the roof.

Up there! Look!

Do you feel the same stroke

Of terror?

Old friends—are those phantoms

1060

Hovering above the house?

Let's get clear of this!

Come on, old bones! Move it! On the double!
Healing Apollo, don't let them near us! Keep them off!

IRIS Don't be spooked by us, old men. This is Lyssa—

Her nickname's Madness—the child of Night.

And I—I am Iris. I serve the gods.

We don't mean to hurt you or the city.

Just one man's house is lined up in our sights:

The one known as the son of Zeus . . . and Alkmene.

As long as his labors made his life bitter,

1070

Necessity shielded him;

and Zeus himself

Held Hera and me off.

But he's carried out

Eurystheus' orders, so Hera's dreamed up

Another labor;

and I'm in on it:

To stain

Herakles' hands with the blood of his own kin

And weigh him down under the guilt of murdering

His sons.

Virgin daughter of black-shrouded Night,

Madness, you have no children:

Don't let your heart

Go out to him.

Wind it up tighter

And tighter in your breast until it lets loose

1080

Such fits of madness the soles of his feet

Burn and tingle to leap after his sons!

Let the sails of murder swell so full

He jams the tiller with his bloody hands

And ferries his own children over Acheron—

His children, the crown of all his labors.

It's time he learnt the depths of Hera's rage.

And my rage, too.

We gods are done for,

And human beings might as well take over

If he gets off without paying our price.

1090

MADNESS The gods wince at the sight of me

For the office I perform—

but I'm noble at heart:

My mother is Night, my father Heaven.

I take no pleasure in afflicting human beings
I count as friends.

And I don't want to see
You and Hera stumble—so hear me out:
Herakles' fame reaches from here to the gods
—It's *his* house you're sending me against.
He brought the wild powers of the earth to heel
And leveled the waves of the storming sea. 1100
Single-handedly, he raised up the honors of the gods
That the arrogance of human beings knocked aside.
Take my advice and give up this plan: It's monstrous!

IRIS Spare us. Hera's and my schemes don't need your
counsel.

MADNESS I'm trying to set you on the straight road: You've gone
astray.

IRIS The wife of Zeus didn't send you to show how temperate
you are.

MADNESS As the Sun is my witness, I'm doing what I don't wish to
do.

But if that's how it has to be, if necessity binds me
To do what you and Herá ask, I'll plunge ahead
The way a pack of hunting dogs bark and snap
To be unleashed:

When I enter Herakles' heart 1110
And make it beat louder and louder in his ears,
Breakers pounding on a reef, or the ground
Shaking and cracking wide, or lightning slashing
Through gasping clouds, won't match my rage:
I'll smash through his roof and rampage room to room,
Slaughtering his sons.

And the murderer won't know
That his hands are stained by the blood of children
He bred from his own flesh—until in his breast the storm
Of my frenzy blows itself out.

Look there: Like a runner jumping
The starting line, he's off—

then stops, starts, head 1120

Tossing, pupils bulging while the whites of his eyes
Roll up;

his breath pants hard, his head lowers
Like a bull about to charge:

Hear his snorts
And bellows, as if he called to the demons
Howling among screeching spirits of the dead—
I'll make you dance even faster to my notes
Of terror!

Run along now, Iris. Your path of honor
Takes you soaring back to Olympus.

My job
Is to slip unseen into Herakles' house.

Exit IRIS and MADNESS.

CHORUS City of Thebes, grieve:

1130

Can't you hear those notes
Piercing as arrows,
Venemous as snakes?
Such music makes me weep
For the son of Zeus, Greece's
Best defender, the flower
Of all manhood cut down
By the ache in his mind.
Lost to himself, we lose
Him too, his spirit rent
By those crazing notes.
Or else he hears a chariot
Gaining from behind:
The daughter of Night
Whips her horses on,
Hair writhing and hissing
Like a hundred snakes,
Gorgon-gaze turning
Human beings to stone.

1140

The god blinks—

and the wind
Of fortune swings around.

1150

The god blinks—
and a man
Massacres his sons.

AMPHITRYON (within the house) Oh, unbearable!

CHORUS Zeus, your son
Is being trampled down
As though he weren't your child.
And Herakles' sons, too,
Will be lost to him.

Vengeance
Slashes his mind to bits;
Madness breathes in his face
And makes him wild . . .

1160

AMPHITRYON (within) Wretched house!

CHORUS The dances are beginning—
Listen—not the dances
Of the god of wine
Joyously brandishing
His ivy-covered staff;
But pulsing in the mind
A silent drumming . . .

AMPHITRYON (within) The walls, the roof!

CHORUS What is that throbbing?
Not the pleasant ache
Of grapes crushed to wine
For the wine god's oblations—
But a pounding in the head
That drives us to the edge . . .

1170

AMPHITRYON (within) Children! Stay away! Run!

CHORUS The pipe keeps shrieking
Notes of ruin. Driven
Wild by the chase, he hunts
You down. Madness dancing

Drunken through the house
 Won't dance for nothing . . .

1180

AMPHITRYON (within) Stop! Don't . . . such suffering!

CHORUS Poor old man, your troubles
 Break my heart—grief won't stop
 Howling! Weep for Herakles' father
 And the wife and mother
 Who bore him sons for this!
 Look! A whirlwind shakes the house!
 The roof is caving in!

AMPHITRYON (within) Wise Athena, child of Zeus
 Who sprung full-blown from his head,
 Why are you doing this?
 You've smashed this man's house
 The way you smashed the giant
 Who attacked Mount Olympos.
 You've sent a shockwave
 Shuddering from heaven down
 To Hades' darkest pit!

1190

Enter MESSENGER.

MESSENGER White-haired old men—

CHORUS Why do you cry out
 Like that?

MESSENGER Inside the house . . . horrible.

CHORUS No need
 For an oracle. I can guess . . .

MESSENGER The boys—they're dead.

1200

CHORUS Ahh . . . AHHHH . . .

MESSENGER Grieve for them. Believe me—there's reason to grieve.

CHORUS Murdered—by the hands of their own father!
 Could a man be that savage?

MESSENGER I'm tongue-tied:
 The words won't come—
 for what we've suffered here . . .

CHORUS Tell us however you can—
 about his boys—
 Cut down by his own hands . . .
 Come on, now. Speak.
 What happened when the gods smashed the house?
 And the poor madman's sons—
 how did they die?

MESSENGER The victims . . . to be sacrificed . . . had been placed 1210
 Before Zeus' altar. Herakles had thrown
 The body of the king out of doors.
 The house was ready to be purified.
 There stood his boys—fine-looking youngsters—
 And Megara and the old man.

The basket,
 With the sacrificial knife and barley,
 Had already been carried round the altar.
 We kept silent, observing the holy hush.
 And then . . .
 reaching out his hand . . .
 to take the torch
 And plunge it in the lustral water— 1220
 Herakles stood frozen in his tracks:

Dead silent. Suspended. Not there.

His boys
 Kept staring at him—
 his face contorts:
 He looks . . . deranged. The whites of his eyeballs
 Rolling up. Veins gorged and bloodshot.
 Foaming at the mouth, slobber dripping down
 His beard.

His laughter was twisted,
 Out of control:
 "So father," he says, "why waste time
 With sacrifices and cleansing fire?

I might as well kill Eurystheus first 1230
 And save the trouble of doing it all again.
 When I cut off Eurystheus' head
 And bring it back here, then I'll wipe
 My hands of blood.

Pour out that water!
 Throw down those baskets!

My bow—
 Bring it here! And my club!

I'm off to storm Mycenae.
 We need crowbars and pickaxes. Those Cyclopes
 Are good builders, every stone squared to
 The red chalk line and tamped down by masons'
hammers!

But iron will pry up the cornerstones 1240
 And smash those high-built walls to bits!"
 Then he was off, talking like he had a chariot:
 He jumps up into it, his fingers gripping air
 The way a charioteer grips the rail,
 His free hand lashing down to whip his horses on.
 We didn't know whether to laugh . . . or shy away
 In fear.

Finally, someone whispers:
 "Is the chief fooling around—
or off his head?"

He was pacing wildly back and forth
 All through the house—

he rushes into the main hall 1250
 And shouts, "I'm here in Nisus' city!—"

Right there
 In his own home!

He lies down on the floor, still dressed
 For sacrifice, and begins to make a feast.
 He was at that only a moment before
 He shouts, "I'm nearing the woods of Corinth!"
 Like an athlete at the games there, he stripped down
 And began a wrestling match—

only he wrestles
 With the air or with clouds of dust as he
 Tumbles in the ring.

Acting as his own herald,
 He quiets the crowd and calls out: 1260

"The winner of the crown—glorious Herakles!"
 Next, he was in Mycenae, cursing out
 Eurystheus; his father clings to his massive hand
 And says, "Son, what's got into you?
 All this make-believe traveling . . .

Surely,

The blood of these upstarts hasn't made you come
 Unglued?"

By now the old man was trembling,
 But Herakles thought Eurystheus' father
 Clung to his hand and begged his mercy.
 He shoves the old man off, strings his bow
 And nocks an arrow, ready to shoot down
 His three little boys:

1270

He thought they were
 Eurystheus' sons!

The children got so scared
 They rushed around this way and that,
 One ducking under his mother's skirt,
 One crouching down in the shadow of a pillar,
 The last huddling like a bird beneath the altar.
 Their mother cries out: "You're their father—
 Are you going to kill your own flesh and blood?"
 The old man and the whole crowd of us
 Started shouting—

1280

he chased his son around
 The pillar, spins the boy about, and shoots him
 Through the heart. The arrow knocks him backwards
 Against the pillar where he gasps and collapses,
 Staining the stone with blood.

Herakles
 Crows his own triumph: "One down, Eurystheus!
 Your fledgling here has paid the price for all your hate."
 The next boy was cowering down by the altar's
 Lowest step, hoping he was hidden.

But when he sees his father swing round
 With his bow to take aim, he throws himself down
 Before his father's knees. He lifts up his hand
 In appeal to his father's beard and neck
 And cries out: "I'm your son, Father—yours—
 Not Eurystheus'!

1290

Herakles' eyes

Like a Gorgon's are rolling in his head—
And when he sees that the boy is too close
For him to draw his fatal bow, he raises
His club . . .

and the way a blacksmith hammers
Red-hot iron, he swings it down on his boy's
Blond head, smashing in the skull—

his second son lay dead.
So he moves on to slaughter his third victim.
The mother was wild now with all she'd seen —
She swooped down in front of him and snatched
Her boy away into the house and locked the door.
He starts prying at the door frame and digging up
The posts —

as if he really were tearing down
The Cyclopes' walls!— and with one arrow, shoots dead
His wife and son.

His father's next—he charged
The old man—but something—
a shimmering

That firmed up into Athena's shape
(At least that's how it looked) shook her spear
Above her helmet's crest—

she hurled a boulder
 Against Herakles' chest—
it knocked him senseless
 And stopped his bloody rampaging.

His back
Struck a pillar that had snapped in two when the roof
Collapsed—

and he lies there now, sprawled against its base.
We all crept out from where we were hiding
And helped the old man tie him to the pillar
With good strong rope, double and triple knots—
So when he wakes, he won't add more blood
To blood already shed . . .

His wife and sons—
A man who's murdered
and there he sleeps! . . .
 Oblivious. Not knowing what he's done.

There's nothing you'd call blessed about such sleep:
No human being could be more miserable.

Exit MESSENGER.

CHORUS The memory of bloodshed stains the mind.
It's like a film blurring everything we see.
Greece can't forget the blood Danaos' daughters
Shed at Argos: Infamous slaughter. 1330
But this latest labor of Zeus' son surpasses
That butchery . . .

Or I could tell you
How Prokne murdered her only son—
Poets try to blot the blood with song
But such violence stains even the Muses' minds.
Prokne had only the one boy—
while you, Herakles,
Driven on by Madness
—father, destroyer—
Murdered all three.

I can't find the tune
To grieve for what you've done. The steps of the dance,
The words of the song that would placate 1340
The dead,
and help us bear our grief,
just won't come . . .

Look: They've thrown back the bolts. The great doors
Are creaking open . . .

*The doors open and reveal the bodies of MEGARA and the
CHILDREN, with AMPHITRYON mourning them; HERAKLES,
asleep, is tied to a broken pillar.*

And there . . . are the children.
Only look at them!
They lie at their father's feet;
their father—
Asleep . . . resting from the labor of slaughtering
His sons:

A terrible sleep so heavy headed
He can't feel the rope's knots tying down his body
To the broken pillar of his home.

And here comes the old man—each step heavier,
More bitter than the last . . .

his soft moaning
Like a bird mourning her unfledged young.

1350

AMPHITRYON Old men, let him sleep. Keep still. Give him
This moment of forgetfulness before
He wakes to what he's done.

CHORUS Old friend,
I can't keep back my tears:
For you. The children.
And for him—who wore the victor's crown,

AMPHITRYON Move back. Don't cry out! Make no noise
That will rouse him from his sleep so deep and calm.

CHORUS It's terrible . . . so much 'blood . . .

[illegible]

CHORUS . . . rises to engulf him.

1360

AMPHITRYON Can't you grieve in silence, old friends?
 If he wakes,
 He'll break free of these ropes and go rampaging again.
 He'll destroy us all:
 The city. His father.
 His own home.

CHORUS I can't . . . I can't keep from crying.

AMPHITRYON *Quiet! I need to lean down to hear his breathing.*

CHORUS Is he sleeping?

AMPHITRYON He's asleep, all right.
If you can call this heavy-bodied slackness
Sleep . . . for a man who's killed his wife and children
With his bowstring's deadly hum.

CHORUS Go on, then—grieve.

AMPHITRYON I'm grieving with you.

CHORUS

Grieve for these dead boys.

1370

AMPHITRYON This tears my heart out.

CHORUS

Grieve for your stricken son.

AMPHITRYON Ahh . . .

CHORUS Old friend.

AMPHITRYON

Hush. Don't make a sound. He's stirring now,
He's turning. There—

he's awake! I'd better hide

Inside the house.

CHORUS

Don't be afraid. Darkness still weighs
His eyelids down.

AMPHITRYON

Be careful there! Watch out!
After all this—it's not dying I'm afraid of.
To lose my light would ease this misery.
But if he wakes and murders me—

he'll add

The guilt of his father's blood to the blood
He already owes the Furies.

1380

CHORUS

That day you took
Vengeance on the Taphians for the blood
Of your wife's kinsmen, storming their fortress
Surrounded by the sea—

that would have been

A glorious day for you to die.

AMPHITRYON

Run, old men!
Get clear of this house! Run as far as you can
From his rage!

There—he's awake!

Soon, he'll be drunk

On killing again, murder on top of murder:
He's set to go rampaging through the city!

1390

CHORUS Zeus, why should you hate Herakles so fiercely
 When he's your own son?
 He'll drown in such rough seas
 Of suffering and pain.

HERAKLES *wakes.*

HERAKLES

Huhhhh . . .

I'm still alive. I'm seeing—what I should see.
 Clear sky. The ground. These shafts of sun.
 Like arrows. My head's aswim . . .

and my mind's

All choppy like the sea after a storm.
 My breath swells high and hard into my aching lungs.
 Not flowing easy, the way it should.

What?

Moored like a ship? Ropes around my chest and arms—

me?— 1400

Herakles?

Anchored fast to this cracked stonework—

And next to me:

Bodies. All dead.

There's my bow . . . and arrows

Scattered on the ground . . .

which have always stood by me . . .

The way a fellow soldier would . . .

Weapons that have

Protected me the way I've protected them.

Have I gone back down to the underworld?

Run that race for Eurystheus over again?

But I don't see Sisyphus hunched at his boulder.

Or the god of death. Or the scepter of

Demeter's child . . . Persephone . . . the god's wife.

1410

I'm out to sea with all this—

I'm lying here,

Helpless . . . at a loss to say where I am.

Where could Herakles be. helpless?

Hey! Friends!

Where are you? Is there anyone around

Who can cure me of this murkiness in my brain?

Everything's a jumble. Nothing's the way it should be.

AMPHITRYON This cuts me to the heart . . . Old friends, should I go to him?

CHORUS You won't go alone—I'll stand by you in your trouble.

HERAKLES Father—why are you hiding your eyes? You're crying!
Don't stand so far off—I'm your son, Father—yours.

1420

AMPHITRYON Yes. No matter how desperate things are—you're still my child.

HERAKLES What's happened to me? Have I done something—to make you weep?

AMPHITRYON Even a god—if he cared enough to know—would grieve.

HERAKLES That terrible? But you still haven't told me.

AMPHITRYON There. It's in front of you. If your mind's clear enough to see.

HERAKLES Tell me! You act like things are changed—for the worst!

AMPHITRYON If your mind's not drunk—on death—then I'll tell you.

HERAKLES My mind? What's the riddle? What are you hiding?

AMPHITRYON I'm still not sure—if your mind's completely sound.

HERAKLES But I don't remember—any uproar in my mind.

1430

AMPHITRYON Old men, should I untie my son—or not?

HERAKLES Untie me. I won't let this pass. Whoever shamed me . . .

AMPHITRYON (untying him) . . . What you've done is burden enough.
The rest, let go.

HERAKLES So silence is all the answer that I'll get?

AMPHITRYON Zeus! Do you see what misery Hera's sent down on us
from heaven?

HERAKLES Is it Hera's spite, then, that struck me down?

AMPHITRYON Let the goddess alone. Bear up under your own bitter life.

HERAKLES My life—is ruined then. You're about to tell me something terrible.

AMPHITRYON There. Look at them. The bodies—of children.

HERAKLES I can't bear to think of what I'm seeing!

1440

AMPHITRYON They weren't enemies—these children—when war broke out against them.

HERAKLES War? Who did this? Who—destroyed them?

AMPHITRYON You. Your bow and arrows. And the god who lent a hand.

HERAKLES You're saying I killed them? You—my own father—messenger of this horror?

AMPHITRYON You were—driven mad. To answer you this way destroys me.

HERAKLES And my wife—was I the one—responsible?

AMPHITRYON All of this . . . by one hand. Yours.

HERAKLES I can't bear up under all this. I'm swallowed up by clouds of pain.

AMPHITRYON So now you know why I was weeping . . .

HERAKLES And I tore down my house in my madness?

1450

AMPHITRYON I only know this: Everything you had is changed to grief.

HERAKLES Where did I go mad? Where did my soul betray me?

AMPHITRYON There. By the altar. As you purified your hands with fire.

HERAKLES For murdering my sons—my dear little boys—I should
Take my own life. Be judge and jury

For my childrens' blood.

Hurl myself from
A sheer cliff. Stab a sword deep into my side.
Or set myself on fire and burn away
The shame that will make everyone turn
Their backs on me.

THESEUS approaches in the wings.

There's—Theseus!
My kinsman and my friend: He's in the way
Of my plans to kill myself.

1460

He'll see my shame:
My childrens' blood will defile the eyes
Of my dearest friend.

What can I do?
Wings can't fly high enough, there's no place
Deep enough for me to hide my shame.
I can't bear the sight of my own shadow!
I'll hide my head in darkness. Away from the sun.
I won't let my blood-guilt stain the innocent.

*HERAKLES covers his head. THESEUS comes forward, with
FOLLOWERS.*

THESEUS Sir, I've come from Athens. My troops are posted
Down by the banks of the Asopos. I'm here
To offer your son a crack allied force:
A rumor reached us that Lykos had overthrown
The government and was pressing you—hard.
Old friend, whatever my hand or my spearmen
Can do, we're here to do it.

1470

Herakles
Brought me back from the underworld—
alive.

For that, I owe him a helping hand.
What's this?

Bodies—scattered about the ground.
It looks like we've come too late—your troubles
Have outmarched us.

1480

These boys—who killed them?
That woman sprawled there—whose wife was she?

Children don't stand in the ranks of spearmen:
This looks out of bounds—some new atrocity.

AMPHITRYON Lord of the hilltop olive tree—

THESEUS Are you all right?
Your voice—sounds broken—with grief.

AMPHITRYON We've been destroyed! Destroyed by the gods' hands . . .

THESEUS These boys you're crying over—who are they?

AMPHITRYON Their father is my son: He bred them.
He murdered them. Their blood is on his hands.

1490

THESEUS What you say—can't be!

AMPHITRYON I only wish it weren't!

THESEUS It's unspeakable—what you just told me!

AMPHITRYON Our whole lives are swept away. Like trash.

THESEUS What happened? How did he do—what he did?

AMPHITRYON Madness like a wave shipwrecked his mind . . .
With arrows dipped in the venom of hydra's blood.

THESEUS Hera's hand is behind all this.
But who is it
Lying there beside the bodies?

AMPHITRYON My son—
My son who performed so many labors.
Who stood shoulder to shoulder with the gods
And bloodied his spear against the giants
On the Plains of Phlegra . . .

1500

THESEUS Was any human being
Ever cursed with a fate worse than this?

AMPHITRYON There's nobody alive who's faced
Greater trials or suffered worse torments.

THESEUS Why is he hiding his head under his cloak?

AMPHITRYON Shame to meet your eye.

Shame before his kin and friends.
Shame at the blood of his butchered sons.

THESEUS I'll take my share in his pain. Someone uncover him.

AMPHITRYON Child! Uncover your face, hold up your head
To the sun:

1510

Against your grief,
friendship
Like a wrestler throws its weight.
Son, my old eyes
Can't keep from tears—I'm begging you
By your beard, your knees, your hand:
Don't let this rage
Run away with you—don't play the lion
Hungry for your own blood.
This race to death
Only swells the flood: There's been enough grief and
pain.

THESEUS You—huddled there—you think you're destroyed—
But look up:

We're your friends. Show us your face.
There's no cloud black enough that can hide this horror
From the sun.

1520

Why are you waving me away—
Warning me off from all this bloodshed?
Are you afraid your words will strike me down
With contagion?

But I can bear it if your suffering
Falls on me—you stood by me once:

You led me
From the underworld back into the sunlight.
I hate fair-weather friends—whose gratitude
Goes stale. Who'll take their share of a friend's good luck,
But won't sail with him when his luck turns sour.
Stand up and face us. Uncover your head.
The gods shake the dice—

1530

and we have to endure

Whatever Heaven sends. To face up to fate
Without flinching;
That's courage in a man.

THESEUS *uncovers HERAKLES' head.*

HERAKLES Theseus—have you seen what I did to my own children?

THESEUS They told me. . . . The suffering you point to—I see it
well enough.

HERAKLES So . . . why have you exposed my head to the sun?

THESEUS You're human . . . nothing human can stain what is
divine.

HERAKLES Steer clear of me. Run from my infection!

THESEUS No vengeful spirit of the dead can taint the love between
friends.

HERAKLES I have no friends. . . . But I'll never regret having been
yours.

1540

THESEUS You helped me when I needed it—now I'm here to stand
by you.

HERAKLES Stand by me? A man who butchered his own sons?

THESEUS Now that trouble drags you down—yes, my tears are for
you.

HERAKLES Can any man alive have done anything this terrible?

THESEUS Misfortune like yours reaches from the earth . . . clear up
to heaven.

HERAKLES So *now* you understand—I want to die.

THESEUS Do you think the gods care one bit about your threats?

HERAKLES The gods follow their own stubborn course . . . as I will
toward the gods.

THESEUS Watch what you say—boasting will only get you in
deeper!

HERAKLES My hold's so filled with grief there's no place to stow
more. 1550

THESEUS What? If you're thinking of . . . Where is your rage driving
you?

HERAKLES To death. Back where I just came from—back to the
underworld.

THESEUS Now you're talking like any ordinary man.

HERAKLES And you—who aren't suffering—who are you to give
advice?

THESEUS Is this Herakles talking? Herakles, who's endured so
much?

HERAKLES But never this much! I've been pushed to the wall.

THESEUS You!—who made the world safe. Great friend to all hu-
man beings!

HERAKLES What good do they do me? Hera's the one who lords it
over us.

THESEUS Don't be a fool. Greece won't let you die such a pointless
death.

HERAKLES Hear me out. What I have to say will show up
Your advice. My life has been a botch,
First to last. 1560

I take after my father—
Who killed my mother's father—and disregarding
Such a blood-curse, married Alkmene who gave birth . . .
To me.

When the foundation's laid so badly
That the whole house tilts, the sons
Inherit . . . grief.

Zeus (whoever Zeus is!)

Bred me as a target for Hera's hate.
Don't be angry with me, old man:

You've acted

The way a true father would—more than this Zeus! 1570
When I was still nursing at my mother's breast,
The wife of Zeus sent gorgon-eyed snakes into
My cradle to poison me.

When I grew up,

My arms and legs were sheathed in muscle
Tight-woven as a herdsman's cloak—
but why go over
All those labors I endured?

Lions;

Many-headed monsters with three bodies;
Giants; charging hordes of sharp-hooved centaurs—
I wiped them out. Slaughtered them all.
Even that bitch
The hydra, two heads sprouting back for each one 1580
I lopped off—I killed her too . . .

my labors

Stretched in front of me, horizonless
As the night sea—
until I reached the dark world
Of the dead:

At Eurystheus' orders,

I brought back from the gates of Hades
The three-headed watchdog snapping and snarling' . . .
But my final labor—
blood on blood—

oh, I triumphed—

Was to butcher my own boys!—
and set

The capstone on my house of slaughter.
My fate's come to this—the law says I have 1590
To leave: My own dear Thebes can't stand
The sight of me!

If I stayed, what temple

Would let me enter? When they saw me coming,
Even my friends would cross the street.
A life as cursed and bloody as mine
—Just who will dare to speak to me?
Well, you say, there's Argos—isn't Argos

Home ground?

But Argos exiled me.

So how about some other city?

But there, they'd all look at me slyly

1600

Out of the corners of their eyes—

and they'd whisper,

"Isn't that him? the child-killer?"

their tongues

Like doors slammed shut against me . . .

Gossiping the way people do behind locked doors:

"So that's Zeus' bastard! the one who murdered

His wife and sons! What's he hanging around here for?

Someone should tell him to clear off!"

I counted myself

Happy once—and to find out that my happiness

Would come down to this:

Blood. Death.

1610

I can't bear to think of it.

That man's lucky

Who's known misery since his birth. His pain

Drags after him, familiar as the sun.

I've come to the end of everything—

My fate's unspeakable:

The earth cries out

Against me, forbidding me to touch the ground,

Rivers and waves shrink away from me,

Hissing, "Don't come near!"

I'm no better than Ixion,

Chained forever to a wheel of fire.

The best fate I can envision is that no Greek

1620

Who ever knew me when my luck was good

Should ever have to see my face again:

A life like that—what good is it.

I hate it:

Useless; bloody; cursed.

And all so that Zeus' wife—

The glorious Hera—can take pleasure in her hate:

Dancing on Olympus, her sandals ringing loud

While her feet pound the gleaming floor.

She's got what she schemed for—

she's smashed

To pieces, foundation and all, the pillar

That held up Greece:

Who would stoop so low as
To pray to such a goddess?

1630

Driven by
Petty jealousy—because this Zeus crept
Into a mortal woman's bed . . .

And so
She's destroyed the one man all Greece looked on
As a friend—

though that man was blameless
And did nothing to deserve such hate.

CHORUS It's Hera who's behind all this. No other god
But the wife of Zeus. You're absolutely right in that.

THESEUS Listen to me:

What's the point of killing yourself?
Human beings have to suffer. So be patient.
Bear up. Show your true strength.

1640

Fate lets no one off,
Not even the gods—

if the poets haven't lied.
Don't the gods trample on lawful love when
They sneak off on the sly?

And haven't they thrown
Their own fathers into chains for the sake
Of gaining power?

But there they are,
Still living on Olympus—
managing just fine
Despite their crimes.

Do you think you're better
Than the gods—you, who are only human?
If they endure their fates without crying out,
Why shouldn't you?

1650

So leave Thebes.
Live up to the law—and come with me
To Athena's city.

I'll purify your hands
Of blood. And give you a home and a share

Of everything that's mine.

All the gifts

My people gave me for killing the Minotaur
And saving the fourteen young people
That beast would have devoured,

I'll give over to you.

Throughout my country, fields and pastures

Have been reserved for me—all these

1660

I'll cede to you and you'll hold them in your name

As long as you live.

And when you die

And descend to Hades, Athens will raise up

Stone monuments to your memory and make sacrifices

In your honor.

The honor that Athens wins

In serving you

will be our city's crown of fame

And make us renowned through all of Greece.

I owe this to you: You saved my life.

Now that you need a friend, I can pay back

What I owe.

But if a god makes up his mind

1670

To reach out to a mortal man, he needs

No human friends:

The god's help is enough.

HERAKLES My troubles . . . what have they got to do with all your
talk?

I can't believe the gods shrug off unlawful love affairs.

Or wrap chains around each others' hands—

I've never believed that—and I can't be persuaded.

No god—

if he is a god—

lords it over another.

A god is self-contained. Perfect. Needing nothing.

He's his own atmosphere. And his own world.

All this talk:

It's only poets mouthing lies . . .

1680

I've thought it over—my head feels muffled

In dark clouds—

but to kill myself—

To blink or flinch away from what fate deals:

That's the kind of man who'll run from a spear
Thrusting in his face.

I won't turn coward.
I'll endure what I have to—and wait for death.
I'll go with you to Athens;

and I'll owe
A thousand thanks for all your gifts.

Theseus—
Look at the countless labors my fate ordained.
I didn't turn aside from one—even when
My heart seemed to freeze inside me
And the air and light felt immovable as stone.
I never allowed myself a single tear.
And now here I am—

1690

my cheeks—
are stained.
It's come down to this:

I'm chained to my fate.
No matter how hard I fight, I can't escape.

Old man. You see what's ahead of me:

Exile—
From Thebes.

And you see that with these hands
I butchered my own boys.

Prepare them for the grave,
Wrap their bodies—

and bury them out of sight.
The law won't allow murderers like me
To touch my own children.

1700

Your tears are all the honors
That they'll get. Lay them in their mother's arms,
Their heads on her breast.

Mother and children
Together to the last.

I tore them from
Each other's arms . . . and killed them . . . not knowing
What I was doing;

Ignorant. Raging. The ache
In my mind blotting everything out.
Bury them, old man. And once the ground
Covers them, stay on here . . . painful though it will be.

1710

Force yourself to keep going. Don't lose heart.
I need your help to bear up under my own sorrows.

Boys:

Your father—

who brought you into the world—

Destroyed you:

Herakles the Great. Heroic Herakles.

All the labors I went through to make your lives

Easier, and give you the best inheritance

I could:

Glory. Fame. Honor—

You won't need them now . . . not ever.

And you, my unhappy wife—so patient

Through all those years of lonely waiting,

1720

So loyal to me and to our bed—

This is your reward . . .

my wife; my boys . . .

and me,

The monster who did all this:

My head's splitting

With it . . .

I've been unyoked from my children

And my wife.

You can't know the bitter solace

Of kissing you like this—

or the bitterness

Of touching my bow and club,

my weapons

That I've loved and kept by me all these years:

Now I can barely look at them.

I can't bear

To keep them . . . or part with them either.

1730

Brushing against my ribs, they'll whisper over and over,

"With us, you killed your wife and sons:

If you keep us,

You keep your children's murderers."

How can I sling my bow and club over my shoulder?

What will I say to excuse it?

But if I throw away

My bow and club—these weapons that helped me

Do what no one else in Greece has done—
I'll be throwing away my life.

My enemies
Will come looking for me, and I'll die
In utter shame. I can't leave them behind too—
No matter how much they hurt me.

1740

Theseus—

One last thing—help me take to Argos
The savage watchdog of the dead.

The pain
Of my dead sons—I'm afraid of what might happen
If I go alone.

Country of Kadmos!
And all you people of Thebes! Cut your hair
In mourning. Grieve with me. See my children
Into their graves. Raise your voices together,
Mourn for me and my dead—

for we're all
As good as dead . . . all of us struck down
By a single blow from Hera's hand.

1750

THESEUS Come on now, get up. My poor, dear friend—you've
wept enough.

HERAKLES I can't get up. My legs are like stone.

THESEUS Necessity is a hammer that breaks even the strong.

HERAKLES I wish I were stone. Blank as stone. Past grief.

THESEUS That's enough. Take your friend's hand.

HERAKLES Be careful. I'll stain more than your clothes with blood.

THESEUS Go on. Stain them. My love for you will protect me from
infection.

HERAKLES All my sons are dead. Now, you'll be my son.

THESEUS Put your arm around my neck. I'll steady you. Come this
way.

1760

HERAKLES The yoke of friendship. But one of us in despair.
Father—this man—choose a man like him for a friend.

AMPHITRYON The country that nursed him is blessed in its children.

HERAKLES Theseus! Help me turn around. I want to see my boys!

THESEUS But you're only wounding yourself more . . .

HERAKLES Oh god, I want to see them—and I want to hug my
father.

AMPHITRYON Child, I'm here. With open arms. What you long for, I
want too.

THESEUS Herakles! Have you forgotten who you are? All your
labors?

HERAKLES My labors—they were nothing—next to this.

THESEUS Herakles. This weakness will be scorned if someone sees
you. 1770

HERAKLES So my life makes you scornful . . . it didn't use to.

THESEUS Look, you're asking for scorn. Where's the old heroic
Herakles?

HERAKLES When you were down in the underworld, how high was
your courage?

THESEUS I was completely crushed. Less than the meanest soul.

HERAKLES Then how can you say that my suffering degrades me?

THESEUS Go ahead. Lead on.

HERAKLES Father—goodbye.

AMPHITRYON Goodbye, my child.

HERAKLES Bury my boys.

AMPHITRYON But who's going to bury me?

HERAKLES I will.

AMPHITRYON You're coming back? When?

HERAKLES After you've buried them.

AMPHITRYON How?

HERAKLES [I'll send word to Thebes and bring you back
To Athens.]

Now—

take in these boys. The earth itself 1780
Can hardly bear up under their weight.
Everything I thought was mine sank in storming seas
My shameful deeds stirred up.

Now, I'll follow
In Theseus' wake, a little boat in tow.
If in your heart you put wealth and power
Over loving friendship, I tell you—you are mad.

Exit THESEUS and HERAKLES.

CHORUS Flickering, uncertain, now we must go,
As if already we were ghosts

weeping and sighing,
Wandering
the earth's depths.

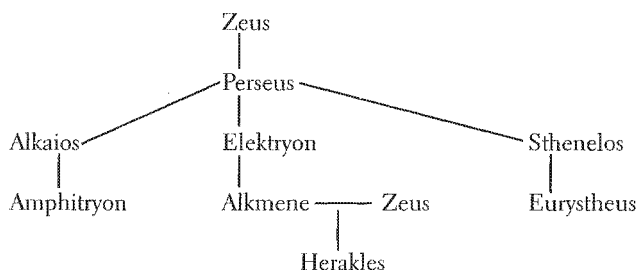
Among all
Our other losses,
we've lost our dearest friend.

Exit AMPHITRYON and CHORUS.

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NOTES ON THE TEXT

1–126 The prologue consists of a typical expository monologue to orient the audience; then there is an exchange between Amphitryon and Megara that establishes the psychological and ideological conflict of the play's first part: between hope based on a view of life's fundamental mutability and a noble determination to withstand one's enemies without compromise in a situation that, seen realistically, appears to be utterly without remedy. Mixed in with the first view is faith in Herakles' heroic capacities, even in the face of death, while the second is felt to be consonant with a Heraklean heroic ideal of dignified endurance—also in the face of death. The main genealogical line referred to here is (as relevant to the play):



3 *who shared his wife* Zeus came to Alkmene's bed while Amphitryon was off on a military campaign.

8–13 *Thebes, where dragonteeth . . . from the ground up* The central foundation myth of Thebes. Kadmos was the sower of the teeth. At the core of the story

there is fratricidal violence that recurs in Theban stories and is reflected in the civil war in the background of this play.

22–23 *a city so huge* The city of Argos, politically important in the fifth century, is in the legendary world of the play blended with Mycenae (and Tiryns) famous for massive stone structures (Cyclopean) but otherwise of no importance in the historical period.

38–44 *There's an old story* Mythographic tradition makes the older Lykos regent of Thebes after the death of Kadmos' grandson Pentheus. He is married to Dirke (an indigenous Theban figure with the name of one of the city's major rivers: see 736 and 1009–15) and in mortal conflict with another strain of Thebes' foundation stories, Amphion and Zethus, children of Zeus and Antiope; Amphion's lyre-playing was instrumental in building Thebes' famous walls. The play's Lykos may be Euripides' invention. He replicates his father's role of ambivalent outsider who threatens a more legitimate, local ruling line.

62 *to celebrate his great victory* Translates Herakles' primary, traditional and cult epithet, *kallinikos* (literally, of fair victory). It's used throughout the play (eight times in all), in the end with bitter irony.

73 *the city of the Taphians* Amphitryon's notable achievement as a young warrior. He was avenging the deaths of Alkmene's brothers (see 1382–83).

94 *Distracting them with chatter* Like *Tell them a story* at line 117. This is at once ordinary and realistic and draws attention to the lies implicit in all storytelling, including the stories told within the play: see lines 1642, 1680 and Introduction p. 22.

125 *That's what courage is* A striking and unconventional redefinition of courage (*aretê*), assimilating the warrior's traditional virtue to an ideal of behavior for the weak and helpless nonwarriors. Megara will reject this ideal in the name of unsubmissive heroic behavior that, she says, is alone fitting for the hero Herakles' family. The last part of the play will show a testing of the viability of a new sense of courage in the figure of the defeated hero himself.

127–160 *Parodos* or choral entrance song. There are fifteen chorus members accompanied by a player of the *aulos*—an oboelike reed instrument. They sing, here rather briefly, in two stanzas having the same rhythmic and melodic patterns, followed by a third (152–60) that shifts, as they re-

spond to the desperate scene before them, to a more rapid tempo. They also dance in coordination with the rhythms of the song, we assume, because of their extreme old age, with deliberate, measured steps (perhaps indicating the effect old age has on their movements as they describe them at lines 142 ff). Their age links them with a more glorious and mythic world of the past while making it impossible for them to be of any practical help in the present.

152–54 *Look at those boys' eyes* Literally, “flashing a Gorgon’s gaze like their father’s.” This evokes the family link to Perseus who killed the Gorgon Medusa and used her snaky head as a weapon. There is also a suggestion of the double-edged nature of such heroic achievement, engaging with and defeating monstrous forces then partly embodying them oneself. The Gorgon motif recurs at 1148, 1296 and 1572.

163–265 *First episode* (dramatic unit between choral songs).

176 *some slimy marsh snake* Lykos reduces the mythic monster Hydra’s name to a common noun *hydra*, that is, water snake.

177–78 *He claimed he strangled* Again an untranslatable verbal maneuver on Lykos’ part, playing *brochois* (with nets)—the normal and ordinary way of capturing a wild animal, off *brachionos* (the arm’s or bare-handed)—the heroic way. Such verbal tricks were characteristic of contemporary speculative and sophistic rationalism.

198–99 *Zeus’s thunderbolts . . . Zeus’ chariot* Herakles was often represented in Greek art as fighting alongside the Olympian gods against the rebellious earth-born Giants. He is usually in Zeus’ chariot using his bow, complementary counterpart to Zeus’ spear, the thunderbolt. See also lines 1103–4, 1500–2, 1578.

234–35 *while you keep / Your own head down* Renders the notion of being impervious to unforeseen circumstances. What follows in the play will make this claim deeply ironical.

284–309 The chorus probably in the single person of their leader, the *koryphaios*, speaks these lines, by far the longest such speech by a chorus in Greek tragedy. The length of the speech strongly underscores a frustrated anger of helplessness and the gap between an older heroic community of Thebes and the ruthless politics that, indifferent to the past, now dominate the city.

284 *Ares tore the teeth* Refers again to Thebes' founding myth (see lines 8—though here assigning the sowing of the dragon-teeth not to Kadmos but to Ares. This may be in order to evoke the chorus's past as warriors).

393–582 First *stasimon*, a choral song with dance, usually consisting of paired stanzas (*strophe* and *antistrophe*), each pair with its own repeated meter, rhythm, and melody. The formal structure of this *stasimon* is unusual overall (the longest in Euripides) and exceptionally stylized. There are three paired sets of stanzas and each individual stanza is followed by an additional shorter stanzaic unit. All of these shorter units are identical in rhythm and melody except the third pair, which is slightly varied and extended by one line. Overall, then, a musical refrain is intertwined with the usual succession of sets of *strophes* and *antistrophes*. Such continuing refrains, very rare in tragedy, are characteristic of religious cult songs, as are some of the rhythms of the rest of the *stasimon*. Thus a formal lament is suggested. At the same time the musical structure, certain stylistic elaborations and the recital of the hero's great achievements also recall the victory songs for athletes that we know from Pindar. Herakles was regarded as the founder of the Olympian games and the imagery of athletic competition often accompanied him. Athletic contests and the tests of the Twelve Labors were akin.

The traditions of the labors and which particular ones make up the set, usually of twelve, are somewhat variable. Here the chorus celebrates the Nemean Lion, the Centaurs, the Golden Hind, the Horses of Demeter, the outlaw Kyknos, the Apples of the Hesperides, the riddling pirates from the seas (this is a unique item among the twelve labors, also in its generalized character), holding up the earth for Atlas after defeating the Amazons, the Hydra, the monster Geryon (guardian of special—otherworldly—cattle that Herakles must steal), and the descent to Hades to get Cerberus. This choice of labors locates Herakles in a wide geographical range, which underplays his sometimes close association with the region of the Peloponnese and highlights his foreign, hellenic character.

419 *Zeus's wood* A sacred precinct at Nemea in the northern Peloponnese.

473 *Mycenae's king* Eurystheus.

498 *Singing Maidens* The Hesperides or daughters of the evening star.

594–804 Second *episode*.

608–21 Herakles' future plans for his three sons would have settled them at three sites in various parts of Greece important in his life stories. The play illustrates the roles of Argos and Thebes. Oechalia is a city associated with Herakles after the events of this play (he sacks it after a quarrel with its king over the king's daughter). The name of the city is a momentary, slightly disorienting reminder of what Euripides' choice of material for this play has otherwise excluded.

623–24 *And I was to choose / For each of you a wife* The extension of Herakles' presence in Greece through his sons was also to have been achieved through marriage connections. These, however, appear to have a more contemporary relevance: Athens and Sparta, at the time of the play's production in the next to last decade of the fifth century B.C.E., have been at war over ten years, and Thebes was aggressively allied with Sparta.

668 As Amphitryon concludes his farewell speech, Herakles (immediately identifiable by his lion-skin costume and the weapons he carries) appears coming down the long *eisodos* or passageway alongside the stage building (there is one at each side), probably at the audience's left, indicating the way to and from "abroad." (The *eisodos* at the right would then indicate the way into the city of Thebes.) By about line 680 he reaches center stage.

747 *Herakles the Conqueror* That is, *kallinikos*, as at line 62 (see note there):

778–79 *gift from the goddess? . . . The Mysteries* The goddess is the queen of Hades Persephone. This alludes to and rejects a version of the story of fetching Cerberus in which the hero simply gets divine help. The Mysteries are the Eleusinian Mysteries closely associated with Athens. They held out the promise of a blessed existence after death. Traditionally Herakles was said to have been initiated into them in preparation for the Hades journey. The more general support of initiation, which also makes a connection to Athens, takes the place of the particular assistance of a goddess.

785 *I stayed to rescue Theseus* Theseus with his close friend Peirithoos had undertaken the reckless project of abducting Persephone from Hades. They failed and were imprisoned there.

805–906 *Second stasimon*. Two pairs of stanzas, each stanza self-enclosed in content. The rhythms are Aeolic, similar in kind to those of the first pair of

stanzas and all the refrains of the first *stasimon*. In form this is a song of praise for Herakles' newly demonstrated valor, combining stylistic features of a hymn and an athlete's victory song.

806–7 *Etna's / Stones* The weight of the volcanic mountain was said to imprison either the monstrous giant Typhon or Enkelados after their defeat by the Olympian gods with Herakles' help (see lines 1577–78 and 1193–4).

821 *old age* Herakles was represented on a number of Athenian vases dated to the first half of the fifth century B.C.E.—subduing the personification of old age, Geras. In his cults at Athens the hero is also most frequently associated with ephebes, young men on the threshold of maturity. In the version of his legend in which he is rewarded by the gods for his services to them and to mankind he is given Hebe, Youth personified, as his bride (see Euripides, *The Children of Herakles* 910–16).

864 *my muse is Memory* The goddess Memory or Mnemosyne is mother of the Muses.

878 *The girls of Delos* The Delian maidens or Deliades were an actual ritual choral group on Delos, the island in the Aegean sacred to Apollo, Artemis and their mother Leto who gave birth to them there. Athens took particular interest in the place for reasons of politico-religious legitimation and had “purified” it about ten years before the production of *Herakles*. The Deliades were also known in Greek poetry from the time of the Homeric “Hymn to Apollo” (ca. 7th century B.C.E.) as figures of legend. This combination of mythic past with contemporary religious practice is similar to the double role of the play's chorus who perform as Theban elders in a mythic story and as ritual actors in the Athenian festival of Dionysos (see Introduction, p. 22). The Deliades sing before Apollo's temple, the play's chorus sing before Herakles' house (887): the chorus seem to praise Herakles as a god, even as something more (compare lines 891–93 and 680), or at least as one who is a savior when the gods are not. Herakles is raised as high as possible before his downfall.

888 *A song the dying swan* See also line 132. The comparison is quite intricate: the chorus members' white hair is like the swan's plumage; the swan's song is thought to be strong and piercing, appropriate both to lament and victory-song; swans were believed to sing most beautifully just before they die—the chorus are very old and death pervades the play; and finally the swan is sacred to Apollo at Delos, which recalls the (para-

doxical) association of the young Delian maidens and the aged Theban men (see previous note).

907–66 Third *episode*. Between lines 942 and 966 the chorus sometimes speaks, perhaps only in the person of their leader, and sometimes sings. The sung lines are paired off to make rhythmic stanzas. The rhythm, called dochmiac (slantwise), has an irregular, staccato and excited feeling to it.

967–1058 Third *stasimon*. The opening call for dancing, already set off by line 965, is self-referential (the chorus are made to remind us that they are—lively—ceremonial dancers as well as actors in a play). The song is a celebration of Herakles' new victory over Lykos, marking a high point for both the hero and the civic and divine world of which he is meant to be a part. Such songs have a ritual dimension, and here there are repeated rhythms and words typical of ritual song form. In Sophocles there are often choral songs of joy or triumph just before final catastrophe. Here Euripides will make such a juxtaposition exceptionally abrupt and surprising.

1059–1326 The dramatic movement is now more fluid and continuous, less distinctly contained in the larger fixed structures. The fourth *episode* (1059–1129), the appearance of Iris and Lyssa, is prefaced by choral exclamations and followed by a nonstrophic choral song mostly in dochmiac rhythm (1130–62; see note on lines 907–66), which takes the place of a formal fourth *stasimon*. Further choral singing in a similar rhythm is now interspersed with cries of Amphitryon from inside the house (1163–97); this starts the fifth *episode* (1163–1326) and runs parallel to what is going on concurrently inside the house, the killing of Herakles' family (similar in structure and function to lines 942–66 that were sung, with interspersed cries from off-stage, while Lykos was being killed). An exchange follows between the chorus (singing) and a household slave (speaking) who has come out from inside the house to report what has happened there. His report, an extensive messenger's narrative, concludes the *episode*.

1064 *This is Lyssa*. Again a mythic personification of a common noun meaning mad fury, used in Homer for that which possesses berserk warriors and by subsequent poets for god-sent madness. It can also mean rabies, dog madness, thought to be transmitted from wolves: *lyssa* appears to be derived from *lykos*, (wolf) as in the name of Herakles' antagonist.

1093 *my father Heaven* Lyssa's father is the primeval cosmic god Ouranos, father of Zeus' father Kronos. Literally Lyssa says here that she is born from Ouranos' blood, which may evoke the violent story of Ouranos' castration by Kronos: Ouranos' blood falling on Gaia (Earth) produced, among others, the Giants and the Furies, avenging spirits with whom Lyssa is here associated (see 1159–62).

1104–29 The spoken rhythm, iambic trimeter otherwise throughout the play, shifts here to trochaic tetrameter, which has a quicker, more excited movement. It is, according to Aristotle (*Poetics* 4.1449a20–23), a rhythm original to the earliest tragedies. Euripides brings it back for occasional use in his later plays with an effect of stylistic archaism.

1187–88 *Look! A whirlwind shakes the house!* In a way characteristic of Greek drama's theatricality, verbal metaphor, actuality and an imaginary staging of that actuality are blended here in the representation of the destruction of Herakles' house. The metaphoric sense of the building's ruin is clear enough (later Herakles will apply the metaphor to his life: see lines 1565–66, 1628–29). The actuality is variously reported. Lyssa had said she would "smash through his [Herakles'] roof" (1115), but also that she would be invisible (1129). The chorus from the stage imagine what is going on (1163, 1169) and evoke now what the audience should "see," the house roof caving in. Then from offstage Athena is confusedly described in terms suggesting a natural disaster, an earthquake (1192–97). Next a household slave as messenger comes out of the house and describes the physical damage done by Herakles (1306–7) and by the earthquake or Lyssa (1315–17). Finally Herakles appears on stage tied to a piece of broken column (1319–20 and 1334–48). We do not know how the destruction was actually staged. (Similar questions are raised by the god Dionysos' destruction of a palace in Euripides' *Bakkhai*.) Probably the audience visualized most of it in their mind's eye, guided by the actors' words, though sound effects seem quite possible and could have been effective. The only actual, visible sign of the physical damage may have been the piece of column to which Herakles is tied.

1210 *The victims . . . to be sacrificed* This is a purification sacrifice to cleanse the house of bloodshed in the revenge killing of Lykos. It takes place in the house's inner courtyard.

1236 *I'm off to storm Mycenae* There is a strong irony or grim logic in having the hero who has traveled so widely confuse the space of his own home with those of his travels.

- 1266 *The blood of these upstarts* Amphitryon refers to a belief that shedding blood can derange one; the audience has been supplied with a quite different cause for the madness.
- 1310–12 *but something—a shimmering* Because the messenger's speech is in every other respect realistic or naturalistic, the supernatural appearance of the goddess Athena (for which we had been prepared at 1189–97) is described in a somewhat hedged way: her "shape" (1311) could refer to an apparition, as Iris and Lyssa had been called phantoms at their first appearance on stage (1060), but also to a statue, the visible form by which the goddess was known to everyone.
- 1327–41 Fifth ode or choral song. Like the previous ode (1130–62) this replaces a formal *stasimon*—it is brief, nonstrophic and primarily in the unsettled dochmiac rhythm.
- 1329–30 *the blood Danaos' daughters / Shed* The fifty daughters of Danaos faced a compulsory marriage with their cousins. All but one of them killed their bridegrooms on the wedding night.
- 1333 *How Prokne murdered* Daughter of Pandion, the king of Athens, Prokne with her sister Philomela killed her son Itys and fed him to her unknowing husband Tereus. This was revenge for Tereus' rape and mutilation of Philomela. Though he had cut out her tongue to silence her, Philomela represented Tereus' crimes by weaving a picture of them. Prokne, Philomela, and Tereus are then turned into nightingale, swallow and hoopoe respectively.
- 1342–1791 *Exodos*. Aristotle uses this term (meaning exit and outcome) to designate what follows the last choral ode of a play. In *Herakles* this is the extended aftermath of the catastrophe. It includes (a) an exchange between the chorus and Amphitryon, mostly sung; (b) Herakles' speeches as he awakens and then determines on suicide, framing one-line exchanges (*stichomythia*) with Amphitryon in which the hero realizes what he has done; (c) the unexpected entrance of Theseus leading to exchanges first between Amphitryon (singing) and himself (speaking) then himself and Herakles and then three longer speeches, two by Herakles, the first explaining his determination to kill himself, the second explaining his change of mind; these frame Theseus' speech to dissuade the suicide and offer help in Athens; a brief passage of exchanges among Herakles, Theseus and Amphitryon and then a few closing lines by the chorus will conclude the play.

1342–34 *The great doors / Are creaking open* This refers to the door of the stage building that represents Herakles' house. In all likelihood the sleeping Herakles, tied to a representation of a piece of broken pillar, and the corpses of the children and Megara were brought forward through this door on the *ekkyklema*, a wooden platform on wheels used to bring out into view figures from the indoors (not representable on the Athenian stage)—usually corpses (killing and even, in most cases, dying were not represented on stage) and sometimes those who were for some reason immobilized. The *ekkyklema* will then be the means of removing the bodies from the stage at the end of the play. Amphytrion here walks on through the door after the *ekkyklema* has been pushed out.

1383 *Vengeance on the Taphians* See lines 72–74 and the note on 73.

1434 *You. Your bow* For great achievements and great disasters Greek thinking and imagination tend to accumulate or overdetermine causes. Here personal agency, its instruments, the weapons (as though personified: see 1727–33), and a higher power, sometimes individualized (as Hera, for instance), sometimes abstract (as the god or fate or the like) are combined. Each of these has something like equal weight, though a character's perceptions and feelings about them may variously shift. Here Herakles responds as if he were simply the agent: "You're saying I killed them?" Later he will call himself blameless (1635). Theseus attributes what Herakles has done now to Hera (1497), now to Heaven and fate (1531–32, compare 31).

1461 *My kinsman and my friend* See Introduction, p. 17, on friendship, *philia*. It is usually tied closely to family relationship and especially to the network of kinship connections among the highborn. Theseus and Herakles are related through both their mothers, Aethra and Alkmene who shared a grandfather, and their divine fathers, the brothers Poseidon and Zeus. In the civic mythology of Athens, Theseus, the younger hero, is in many ways both modeled on and a more localized version, specific to Athens, of the older, Panhellenic figure of Herakles.

1469 *my blood-guilt stain* Any shedding of human blood, intended or not, created a pollution that was regarded as infectious to sight, touch and hearing. A homicide was forbidden all religious and social interaction, and to reduce the risk of infection his trial had to take place outdoors. This archaic belief was in force in civil settings, but there are indications of rationalistic views less impressed by it. Theseus in the name of friend-

ship and in spite of Herakles' protests will disregard the risk of pollution to himself (1521–25, 1537–39, 1758).

1485 *the hilltop olive tree* This refers to the citadel of Athens, the Acropolis. The olive tree, located there, is iconic, sacred to Athena who had given the olive to the community; in return she became the city's patron.

1500 *Who stood shoulder to shoulder* See note on 198–99.

1514 *By your beard* This signals the traditional ritual gestures of supplication. Compare lines 1292–93.

1515 *don't play the lion* The lion comparison originates in Homer, standing for a heroic and often self-destructing ferocity. Herakles has both mastered the lion and put on its skin, that is, taken on the contradictory impulses of heroism. Amphitryon here urges a rejection of an older heroic temper.

1530 *Stand up* Herakles since waking up has been sitting, we may imagine, huddled up. At Theseus' arrival he covers himself with his (probably) lionskin cloak, out of shame and to prevent the pollution to one who might see him. He is now uncovered but does not find the strength to stand up—this seems implied by lines 1752–60 that indicate his being helped up and supported by Theseus. Up to that moment, then, only just before the play's end, Herakles remains as he had appeared at the beginning of the *exodos* (at line 1342), on the ground, surrounded by the corpses of his wife and children, and speaks from there.

1547 *Do you think the gods care . . . about your threats?* A pair of lines may be missing from the Greek text before this line. They must have made clearer the nature of Herakles' threats and his response in the following line. There is a general sense that Herakles wants to assert his autonomy in the face of his misfortunes. He would achieve this by taking his own life. Both the claim to autonomy and suicide are taken by Theseus as a challenge to the gods (the challenge may have been made explicitly by Herakles in a missing line)—a challenge, Theseus insists, that can only be useless if not actually dangerous.

1559 *Greece won't let you die* Compare Amphitryon's charge to the contrary at lines 253–59. In fact it will be Athens, through Theseus that will provide the conditions for Herakles' survival. Athens stands in for Greece as a

whole: Thucydides reports Perikles making the claim that Athens is "a school for Greece."

- 1562 *I take after my father* This alludes to the archaic and tragic notion of guilt inherited through the family. Herakles sees himself cursed through both his fathers because of Amphytrion's blood guilt and Zeus' adultery.
- 1590 *the Law says* This is the contemporary religious and civic requirement that any one who has spilled human blood (except under conditions of war) must go into exile to be purified. This is what brought Amphytrion to Thebes (24-25).
- 1598 *But Argos exiled me* This is in a political sense. Herakles' rival cousin Eurystheus, under Hera's protection, holds the power there.
- 1626 *Dancing on Olympos* Hera is imagined dancing in triumph over Herakles' downfall, as the chorus had danced in triumph over that of Lykos.
- 1631-32 *Driven by / Petty jealousy* It should not be forgotten that legitimate marriage is the goddess Hera's particular domain. Her vindictiveness against Herakles is also part of the strong sanction she exercises on behalf of a social and institutional norm. The injustice or plain irrationality, of course, is that the sanction is exercised through Herakles because of the transgressions of his divine father.
- 1641 *Fate lets no one off* Fate translates *tukhê*, the uncontrollable turn of events, an abstract concept, not a mythic force. The same notion is expressed at line 1695 and, blended with the figure of Hera, at 1751.
- 1642 *if the poets haven't lied* Whether poets tell the truth or not is sometimes a theme of earlier Greek poetry. Its appearance in a dramatic setting is unusual, though characteristic of Euripides and his tendency to open up the texture of his drama and make his audience aware of an imaginative process at work. More often this is done by having a character or the chorus question some feature of a myth that is particularly contrary to normal human understanding, for example, Helen's birth from an egg (*Helen* 21) or the reversal of the sun's course (*Electra* 737-38).
- 1664 *Stone monuments* There were a number of shrines and monuments to Herakles throughout Athens and its environs. The temple called Hephaesteum or Theseion built around the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. in the

agora, the city's central gathering place, had sculptures representing in parallel the deeds of Herakles (nine labors) and those of Theseus.

1685 *I'll endure what I have to—and wait for death* This translates a sense of the manuscript reading of the Greek. Finding such a sense too close to Herakles' rejected intent to commit suicide, many scholars have accepted an emendation that would translate as "find the strength to endure life." But this is unnecessary and perhaps a touch modernizing. Herakles says he will find the strength to endure the worst, including the most powerful adversary, death. For the relentless presence of death in the play see Introduction, p. 17.

1753–55 *My legs are like stone . . . I wish I were stone* Being like stone is proverbial for lack of feeling, sometimes due to an excess of feeling (as in the story of Niobe who in her extreme grief at the loss of all her children is turned to stone, though paradoxically still weeping: see *Iliad* 24.602 ff.). The image here may be additionally suggestive. It can recall a number of earlier references to the Gorgon who turns one to stone, first evoked in connection with the fear inspired by Herakles' heroic power, then for the forces that turn this power against him (see note on 152–54). Here the image refers as well to Herakles' physical weakness, so great that he can hardly move, and to the concomitant emotional weakness that keeps him clinging to his dead family. The figure on stage is caught in a death-like immobility—that could be seen to anticipate the stone monuments that had been promised to commemorate him at his death (1662–64). There is a powerful tension and connection, finally, between Herakles' desire to be oblivious of his grief, in effect, to die, as he had first intended after the catastrophe, and the public memorial that he is to become. The image of stone just as the play is about to end, may also draw our attention to Euripides' dramatic medium that is another form of commemoration wherein Herakles is less a fixed, monumental figure than a fluid and contradictory representation of what it might mean to be human.

1779–80 This passage is in brackets because the Greek text contradicts line 1710 where Amphitryon is asked by Herakles to stay in Thebes. Though there is a clear tradition of a tomb of Amphitryon at Thebes, there is no known connection between him and Athens.

1791 There are final exits in the three different directions available to human actors on the Athenian stage. Herakles supported by Theseus goes out (prob-

ably) at the left of the stage building, that is, in the direction away from Thebes (see note on line 668). The bodies of the dead family (on the *ekkyklema*: see on lines 1342–34) are brought back into the house through the door that marks the center of the stage; Amphitryon accompanies them. The chorus, perhaps as they sing their last lines, move out at the right-side entrance, that is, in the direction of the main space of the play's location, the city of Thebes. Each of these groups moves slowly, with difficulty.

GLOSSARY

ACHERON: underground lake or river that must be crossed to reach Hades.

ALKMENE: mother of Herakles, with Zeus as father, granddaughter of Perseus.

AMAZONS: legendary warrior women who live near the Black Sea; Herakles and other Greek heroes waged war against them.

AMPHITRYON: husband of Alkmene and foster father of Herakles.

ANAUROS: river near Mount Pelion in Thessaly.

APOLLO: son of Zeus and Leto, twin brother of Artemis; prophetic, musician, and healing god with major shrines at Delphi and on the island of Delos.

ARES: god of war, son of Zeus and Hera, father-in-law of Kadmos.

ARGOS: city in the north central Peloponnese, whose patron goddess is Hera.

ARTEMIS: daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo; goddess of the wilderness and hunting.

ASOPOS: river at the frontier of Thebes.

ATHENA: daughter of Zeus, patron goddess of Athens.

GLOSSARY

- ATLAS: god of the generation of Titans who carries the heavens on his shoulders.
- BAKKHOS: another name for Dionysos, god of wine, ecstatic possession, madness and the theater.
- CENTAURS: part horse, part human creatures associated with wild regions and at times with wild and violent behavior.
- CERBERUS: monstrous dog who guards the entrance to Hades.
- CHARON: boatman who ferries the dead to the shores of Hades.
- CORINTH: city on the eastern end of the northern Peloponnese, site of the Isthmian games.
- CYCLOPS: (Cyclopes in plural) gigantic, one-eyed (or circle-eyed) beings renowned as smiths and builders of monumental walls.
- DANAOS: father of fifty daughters, the Danaids, betrothed to their cousins (see note on lines 1329–30).
- DELOS: island in the Aegean, birthplace of Apollo.
- DELPHI: town and shrine of Apollo on the southern slope of Mount Parnassos.
- DEMETER: mother of Persephone, goddess of grain.
- DIOMEDES: king in Thrace, in northeastern Greece, son of Ares.
- DIRKE: river in Thebes; name of the wife of the older Lykos.
- ELEKTRYON: father of Alkimene, brother of Amphitryon's father Alkaïos; Amphitryon kills him, perhaps accidentally, in a quarrel.
- ETNA: volcanic mountain in Sicily.
- EUBOEAE: island extending from the southeast mainland, across from Athens, up to central Greece.

GLOSSARY

EURYSTHEUS: son of Sthenelos, cousin of Herakles, king of Argos and Mycenae; Herakles' labors are undertaken on his account.

FURIES: deities of punishment for the bloodshed of kin.

GERYON: monstrous three-bodied guardian of cattle in the far southwest of Spain, the outer western limits of the world as the Greeks knew it; stealing the cattle is one of Herakles' labors.

GIANTS: children of Earth who challenge Zeus and the Olympian gods in battle.

GORGON: refers to Medusa, the mortal one of three sisters, killed by Perseus; the sight of, or the gaze from, her snake-haired head turned beholders into stone.

HADES: lord of the underworld and the dead; his name also designates his kingdom.

HEBROS: river in Thrace in northeastern Greece.

HELIKON: mountain, and mountain range, northwest of Thebes; home of the Muses who had a famous shrine there.

HERA: queen of the gods, wife of Zeus and his sister (a mark of her status); goddess of marriage.

HERAKLES: son of Zeus and Alkmene, foster son of Amphitryon; Greece's best-known and greatest hero, widely worshiped in cult. His physical capacities are enormous and his achievements are numerous, hard fought for and extraordinary. He is unusually close to the world of animals on the one hand (often in monstrous form) and to the gods on the other. In the literary tradition he is drawn more particularly into the human realm as a warrior with a family and as a figure subject to mental and moral as well as physical trials. He is rarely cast in tragic roles; his part in this play and in Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* are the only known examples.

HERMIONE: town near Argos where Demeter was worshiped as a chthonic or under-earth goddess.

GLOSSARY

HOMOLE: mountain in Thessaly.

HYDRA: poisonous, multiheaded water snake in the swamps of Lerna; Herakles destroys it, cutting off the heads and burning the necks before the regenerating heads could grow back.

IRIS: messenger of the gods whose name means rainbow.

ISMENOS: river in Thebes.

IXION: the first mortal to kill his own kin. Zeus purifies him of the killing but Ixion then attempts to rape Hera, for which, bound on a whirling wheel, he is forever punished in Hades.

KADMOS: founder of Thebes.

KREON: father of Megara, ruler of Thebes who is overthrown and killed by Lykos.

KYKNOS: son of Ares, savage warrior who preys on travelers; killed by Herakles.

LERNA: town south of Argos, famous for its springs.

LETO: mother of Apollo and Artemis; their father is Zeus.

LYKOS: former ruler of Thebes; his son of the same name is the usurper in this play who threatens to destroy Herakles' family.

LYSSA: daughter of Night and Ouranos (Heaven), embodiment of raging madness.

MEGARA: daughter of Kreon, wife of Herakles.

MINOTAUR: half man, half bull for whom Minos, king of Crete, exacted a tribute of Athenian youths and maidens; killed by Theseus.

MINYANS: inhabitants of Orchomenos, a city that is neighbor and rival of Thebes.

GLOSSARY

- MYCENAE: a city notable at the time of the Trojan War, close to Argos with which it is identified in this play.
- NEMEA: area north of Argos that includes a well-known sanctuary of Zeus.
- NISUS: king of the city of Megara, west of Athens on the northern side of the Isthmus of Corinth.
- OECHALIA: city on Euboea (see note on lines 608–21).
- OLYMPOS: Greece's highest mountain, in the northeast of the central mainland; home of the gods.
- PARNASSOS: mountain to the west of Thebes.
- PELION: mountain in Thessaly.
- PENEIOS: river in Thessaly.
- PERSEPHONE: daughter of Demeter and Zeus, wife of Hades and queen of the underworld.
- PERSEUS: son of Zeus and Danae, from Argos; grandfather of Alcmene; he cuts off and keeps the head of the Gorgon Medusa.
- PHLEGRA: site of the battle of Giants and the Olympian gods, said to be in northeast Greece.
- PHOLOE: a high plain in Arcadia, in the central Peloponnese, where the centaur Pholos entertained Herakles.
- PLUTO: another name for Hades.
- PROKNE: daughter of the Athenian king Pandion, wife of Tereus, mother of Itys (see note on line 1333).
- SISYPHUS: one of the exemplary transgressors in Hades (Ixion is another), punished by having eternally to roll a boulder up a hill and have it always roll down again.
- SPARTA: city in the southern Peloponnese.

GLOSSARY

- TAINARON:** cape at the southernmost point of the Peloponnese where a cave was taken to be the entranceway to Hades.
- TAPHIANS:** a people in northwest Greece against whom Amphitryon led a successful expedition to avenge their killing of Alkmene's brothers.
- THEBES:** city in south central mainland Greece.
- THESEUS:** Athenian hero, son of the god Poseidon (his human father is Aigeus). In this play he appears to be young and in the earlier phase of his heroic career.
- THESSALY:** large region of east central and northern mainland Greece, renowned for its horses.
- ZEUS:** ruler of the Olympian gods; father of a number of them and of human heroes, including Herakles.